"In here?" the man asked, opening the door to the house. He quickly found the bathroom, and started taking off his clothes right there in the hallway. "Hey!" Yuuki yelled, gaping at him in amazement. "You like looking at naked men or something?" The man smirked.

Tsukada and Yuuki are the perfect couple, living a life o bliss in the shadow of towering Mount Asahidake. Whil Tsukada is a risk-taking adventurer, homebody Yuuk runs a café called Fuuka. But after Tsukada dies in a tragi avalanche, Yuuki sinks into a dark depression, unable to ge his lover out of his mind. An old schoolmate helps him eas the pain, but their relationship is uneasy at best.

One year later, a mysterious stranger walks into Fuuk carrying a mountain-climber's backpack. Kamishiro is brawny master chef who's looking for a job. Yuuki ends u hiring him, and even throws in room and board.

Soon, they are roommates with separate bedrooms, unti one fateful night, when everything changes between them..

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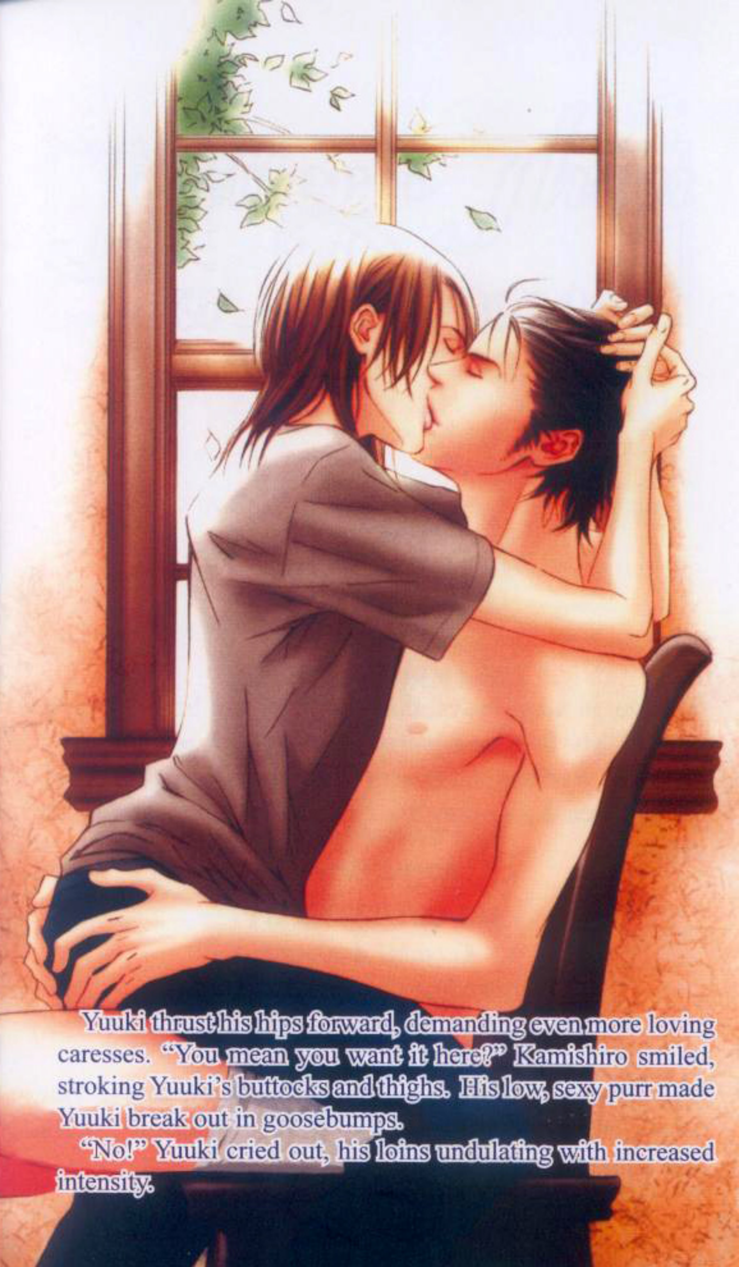


Yuuki thrust his hips forward, demanding even more loving caresses. "You mean you want it here?" Kamishiro smiled, stroking Yuuki's buttocks and thighs. His low, sexy purr made Yuuki break out in goosebumps.

"No!" Yuuki cried out, his loins undulating with increased intensity.

WRITTEN BY
Raica Sakuragi
Birthday: March 4th
Blood Type: B

For me, in many ways, this has become a book of “first times”. My first long-haired *uke.* My first *seme* dressed in white. Perhaps a different kind of uniform springs to mind when I mention that? Ah, but he too dresses in white.

ILLUSTRATED BY
Katsumi Asanami
Birthday: November 30th
Blood Type: A

I seem to have this connection with wounded men. You might even call their scars as “medals of honor.” That's the impression I'm left with.

Better Than a Dream

目を閉じて見る夢よりも

Written by
RAICA SAKURAGI

Illustrations by
KATSUMI ASANAMI

English translation by
Kelly Quine

June
Los Angeles
OAKLA PUBLISHING
Tokyo

Preface

He left the main highway and turned onto a one-lane country road. Its guardrails bore the scars of countless fender-benders, and mottled rust stains blossomed from spots where the paint had been stripped clean.

A bedroom community appeared, dotted with old buildings, but no billboards. The scene looked like a bucolic landscape painting: quaint houses, rolling hills, soaring mountains in the distance.

A mutt snoozing in his doghouse injected a touch of realism, along with the trees wavering in the soft breeze. The dog suddenly poked out his head and pricked up his ears. The bus that traveled this route every few hours was coming down the road.

It swayed back and forth as it approached, but the dog didn't bother to keep looking. The noise had roused him, to be sure, but he knew the bus never stopped here.

But today was different. Had the dog been human, he might have raised a curious eyebrow.

The *whoosh* of compressed air sparked a vague memory in the dog's muddled mind. Back in the old days, his master would get off the bus and give him a small, sweet-smelling treat.

The dog thumped his tail in hopeful anticipation, looking at the exit door. Just as he was about to bark out a welcome, the dog realized that something was amiss.

This man didn't have the same gait as his master, or the same pleasant scent. The dog slumped to the ground and sniffed discontentedly, his tail going limp. As he looked up at the man who was paying his fare, the dog recalled how his master had looked. This human was a complete mismatch, he realized, feeling a little afraid.

Finally, the man exited, rocking the bus with each step down. One of his legs moved normally, while the other limped strangely behind him. The dog turned his head, looking puzzled.

"Is this the—" the man started to say, looking over his shoulder.

But before he could finish the sentence, the bus door coldly slammed shut. The driver simply couldn't be bothered talking to an out-of-towner. Way out here in the sticks, he refused to argue with those type-A personalities from the city who were always complaining about something.

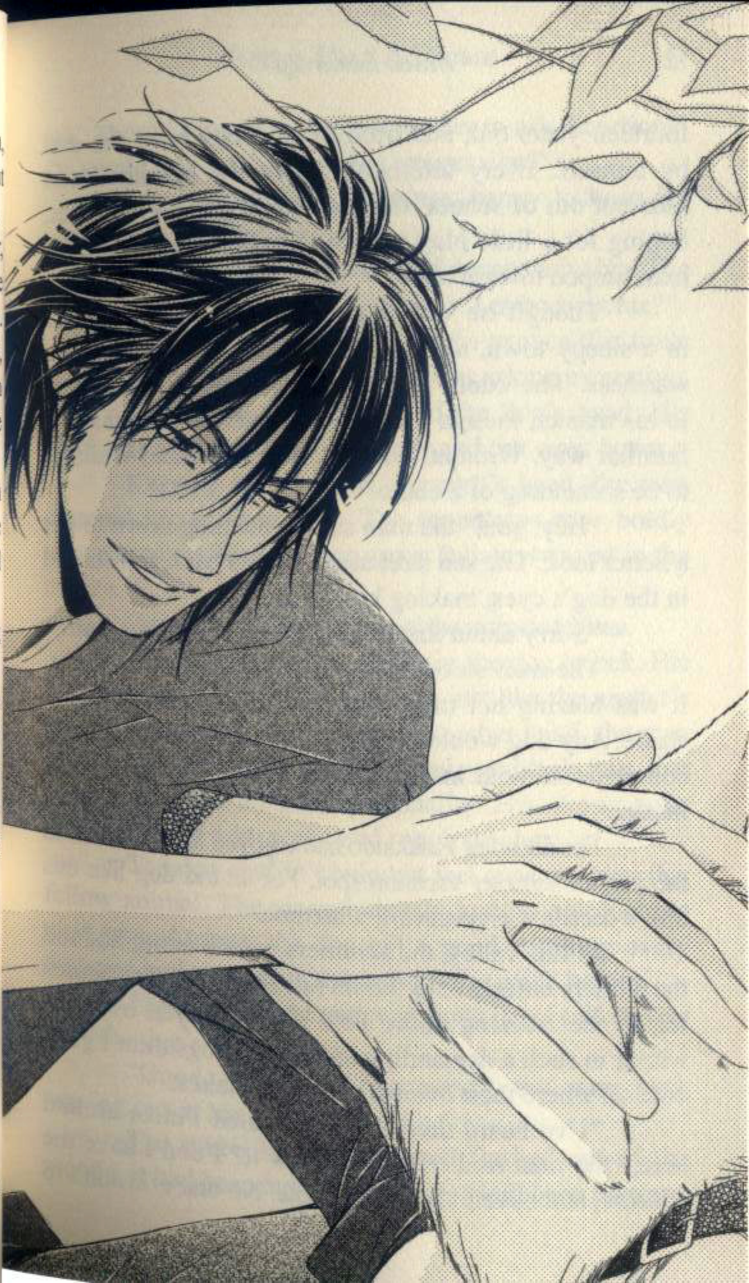
"Damn. I should have asked where the hell I am," the man muttered, scratching his head. The movement caught the dog's attention, and he looked up with glittering black eyes.

"Eh?" the man said.

The dog wagged his tail, fighting the urge to dart back into his doghouse.

"Hey, there."

The dog answered with a polite *wuff.* He was



fourteen years old, and tired of sleeping away the day by himself. Every afternoon, when the neighborhood kids got out of school, the dog would jump to his feet, hoping for a little play to break the boredom. Now the man limped toward him.

Though he was a domesticated animal raised in a sleepy town, the dog hadn't lost all of his canine wariness. The odors assaulting his nose didn't belong to his master, though the human moved in his master's familiar way. Without a doubt, this man found walking to be something of a chore.

"Hey, you," the man said, crouching down to get a better look. The sun streamed over his back and shined in the dog's eyes, making him blink.

"Sorry about that! Pretty bright out today, huh?"

The man stood up again, blocking out the light. It was blazing hot today, but felt quite pleasant in the shade. Any dog would instantly like a human who could commiserate with his lot in life. His tail wagged even faster.

For decades, Hokkaido had enjoyed its reputation as the perfect summer vacation spot. For an old dog like this one, a decade was practically a lifetime.

In this valley, the summers were blazing hot and the winters bitterly cold. When fall arrived, temperatures fell to the freezing point. Few people stayed over the winter in such a demanding locale, but dogs didn't get a vote on where their owners put down stakes.

"I've heard there's a café called Fuuka around here," the man said. "Do you know it? I don't have the address, and haven't seen any signs. No one is around to ask. Should I barge in on your master to ask directions? Or would that leave the wrong impression?"

The dog barked a response, happy to keep the conversation going.

"Nice work!" the man said appreciatively. "The noise might bring somebody around. Anybody home?"

The dog barked with a certain nuance this time, suggesting he understood the man was asking a question. With a wry smile, the man patted the dog's head. His hand was bigger than the master's and felt even better.

Keeping his hand on the mutt's head, the man scanned his surroundings. The mountains rose boldly above verdant fields, where green foliage swayed in the breeze.

"Lovely," he sighed, gazing at the majestic tableau.

The man put out his hand for the dog to lick. His skin felt rough to the dog's tongue, just like the master's chin at the end of the day. With his other hand, the man raked through his mass of tangled, jet-black hair that seemed at odds with his personality. His strong arms were scattered with scabs and rough patches.

The dog couldn't help but feel superior over this fellow animal. The man obviously had no one looking after him. At least the dog got a good brushing every day, and had even been shampooed the week before.

The fact that the man was not a beast sailed right over the dog's head.

"Good. Somebody's coming," the man said, peering out of his long bangs.

The rabbit had finally been flushed out of the woods. It had been ages since the dog had been hunting, and he turned around to look.

"At last," the man said, sounding relieved.

The dog lowered his nose and sniffed. The approaching human was an old grandmother who often passed this way. She had never, ever given the dog a treat of any kind.

"Well, then," the man said, nodding at the dog. The mutt instantly sank his teeth into the cuff of the man's tattered jeans.

"Hey, hey, hey," the man laughed, gently poking the dog's nose. The dog whimpered, but didn't let go.

"Oh, well. Looks like she's passing us by anyway. No harm, no foul. You really want to play that much?"

The dog energetically wagged his tail, begging the man not to leave.

"Sorry, but I don't really have time today. Maybe next time?"

"Next time" was a concept much too abstract for a dog to grasp, so the man laughed and crouched down again. His pleasant voice made the dog feel safe, and he opened his jaws.

"Um, excuse me."

The old woman gave them a puzzled look. A stranger rarely showed up in these parts. Was this man some prodigal son who had finally come home? She wracked her brain, trying to figure out who he might be.

"Could you tell me if there's a café called Fuuka around here?" the man asked, breaking into her thoughts.

"Fuuka?"

"A young man runs it."

"Oh! You must mean Sano-san's grandson," the grandmother said, nodding vigorously.

"Yes, yes, that's right."

She looked him up and down. He reminded her of a relative she hadn't seen in ages. Pangs of grief sprung up in the woman's heart, but neither man nor dog could have known she was feeling that way.

"Over there," she said quietly.

"Where?"

The woman jabbed her gnarled finger beyond the doghouse, at a building with white stucco walls covered in ivy. A path to the front door wound up a small hill.

"That's Sano-san's house. They call it Fuuka. A pun, supposedly."

"Hey, thanks!" the man said, bowing politely. As if sharing in the man's joy, the dog happily wagged his tail up and down.

Now the old woman's opinion of the man shifted from "suspicious" to "odd duck." Since the dog wasn't afraid of him, he must not be dangerous. Her natural wariness towards strangers was diminished one tiny iota.

"Sorry, no more time for fun and games today," the man told the dog. "But if I find a job, I'll be back."

The old woman wondered if the stranger was looking to work at the café. She took one last glance at man and beast and noticed the stranger's odd gait as he crossed the deserted road. She made another mental note (bum leg, talks to dogs) and continued on her way, carrying along some nice gossip for her next visit to the hospital waiting room.

But if the dog could speak, he would have said: "You old biddy. I figured all that out a long time ago."

Chapter 1

The counter of Fuuka had just five stools, while three booths faced the large window. The café was so small, if you took two or three steps in any direction, you would immediately crash into a wall.

The building sat alone in a residential neighborhood at the edge of town. The owner doubled as the chef, and as far as he was concerned, he had more than enough room.

In the light of day, viewed from the back, the crudely-built juncture between the original house and the café was obvious. But once the sun went down, you couldn't really tell.

It was about closing time. Yuuki looked at his last two customers and sighed. Should he tell them it was time to go? He grabbed a tray and got up from his stool in the kitchen.

"Hey, Yuuki-chan! How about putting another parfait on my tab?" a high school girl begged, her face caked with makeup.

"Keep eating at this rate and you'll blow up like a balloon. Let's call it a night instead."

"But it's *sooo* good."

"It's *sooo* good, eh?" Yuuki teased, playfully tapping the girl's forehead with his finger. The girls showed no signs of leaving, but he kept on smiling.

"C'mon, sit down," the other girl said.

"Time to pay your bill," Yuuki firmly replied.

"Oh, don't say that."

They were only sixteen, but batted their eyelashes at him like grown women. Yuuki stifled another sigh and sat down at their table. They had been hanging out there for at least two hours now.

"Your hair is really getting long, Yuuki-chan. Way longer than mine," the first girl said.

"It's a pain to cut it. Easier to let it grow," Yuuki muttered.

"I could braid it for you," she offered.

"Enough already."

She reached out and tried to grab his ponytail, but he ducked away and shook his head.

"Now miss," he scolded, "this isn't a hostess club, you know."

"Oh, gross! Like I don't know that! But your hair is so—"

Suddenly she fell silent, but her face spoke volumes as she looked into his eyes. Was he ever going to get a haircut?

"What?" Yuuki muttered.

"N-nothing," she stammered, turning her attention to the girl sitting next to her.

"My skin's just been awful lately!" she gushed, spraying spit. "Every day I have a new zit."

"Me, too! Do you know anything that works? They say don't put your face on your pillow, but how are you supposed to sleep?"

If you keep pigging out on ice cream, the fat's

gonna come out somewhere, Yuuki wanted to say, but he swallowed his words instead.

"It's almost ten. High time you two went home."

"Nah. It's okay."

"No, it's not. It gets pretty dark around here without street lights. Who knows what creeps could be out there."

"Will you come with us then?" the first girl asked.

"I'm busy," Yuuki lied.

The girls shrieked with laughter.

"But you don't have any other customers."

They were absolutely right, but Yuuki furrowed his brows and glared at them. Even after he closed the doors and turned out the lights, he still had lots to do, something these clueless girls would never understand.

He had already taken down the "Open" sign and stowed away the menu board. None of his regulars stuck around past the dinner hour. These high school kids taxed his patience, but since he knew their mothers and grandmothers, he never really complained.

"Hey, I saw your 'Help Wanted' sign outside," one girl said suddenly. "Could I do that? My mom would probably be okay with it."

"I need someone to work days. The school year just started, right?"

"What about after school lets out? I need a part-time job."

"Try the convenience store. They have a sign out, too."

"Meanie!" the girl pouted.

Yuuki narrowed his eyes at her. Not that long ago he'd been in the same boat, wanting to make money to supplement his meager clothing allowance. But these girls needed so much more, what with cell phone bills and cosmetics and a million other things.

The first girl gave him a 500 coin to pay for the 480 yen parfait.

"Keep the change," she said pertly.

"No, thanks," he said with a scowl. It was only twenty yen, but it didn't belong to her. He was trying to tell her not to waste her parents' money, but she didn't get the message.

"You're so cute when you're mad," she laughed. "See you tomorrow."

Pretending that she was leaving under great duress, she glanced back over her shoulder in a rather depressing display of coquettishness.

She didn't stir his blood in the least, not even the tanned arms or ripe thighs that peeked out of her short sailor suit. Her cherubic face nullified the allure of her ripe body. Though there was something cute about her heavy makeup, it only served to remind him of her immaturity.

"So they finally left? How nice of you to baby-sit," said the man sitting at the counter. He looked exasperated as he smoked his cigarette. The bell hanging in the doorway swung back and forth, a lingering reminder of the last customers of the day.

"Hey, Sano, did she actually call you Yuuki-chan?"

"Well, I've known her family since her grandmother was alive. When the kids were born, my grandma pitched in to help them out."

The man at the counter furrowed his brows. For some reason, the girls never gave him a passing glance, no matter how many times their paths crossed.

Not to mention their claim that no other customers had been there. How could they miss the big guy sitting at the counter? But they had just laughed. To them, he wasn't a *real* customer.

"A helluva sweet tooth they have. They shouldn't scarf down those parfaits all the time."

At first, Shin only came in once a month. Then once every two weeks. Then every weekend. Now the only days Yuuki didn't see him was when he was away for work.

"They eat them instead of dinner," Yuuki shrugged.

"They call that dinner?"

If you're so concerned with their welfare, why not make a move and see what happens, Yuuki thought, giving his friend a teasing look.

Suddenly their eyes met. Yuuki's heart thumped in an alarming manner, and he quickly averted his gaze.

"Yeah, it's a pain living in the same neighborhood with them. High school girls don't go in for blue-collar fashions anymore. Even you dressed down in jeans and a T-shirt. Man, those were the days."

"Maybe it's that scary look in your eyes, Shin," Yuuki said. But another voice inside him disagreed.

Shin violently stubbed out his cigarette, betraying his irritation, but still managed to smile.

He hadn't changed one bit since they'd been at school together. Except now he worked at a local construction company, and had exchanged his school uniform for a pair of coveralls. With his shortly cropped hair, suntanned skin, and stormy good looks, Shin was a likeable guy, though sometimes he had a sharp tongue.

Back in school, students and teachers both called him Shin, as did Yuuki. Shin had gotten into the habit of calling Yuuki by his surname, Sano.

Even now, many years later, Yuuki could only relate to Shin as a friend. But whenever their eyes met, Yuuki had to look away. Shin's gaze had become a sharp sword that ripped open old wounds.

"Maybe I should grow my hair out, too. Might improve my standing with the ladies."

"Don't say things like that. It creeps me out."

Yuuki hadn't cut his hair for nearly a year, so it almost reached his shoulders. For simplicity's sake, he tied it back in a ponytail.

But he wasn't growing out his hair to be popular with the ladies, as Shin suggested. In fact, he didn't really know why he had resisted getting it cut. Lucky for Yuuki, his friends never commented on his quasi-effeminate look.

"Maybe I'll just let the top get a little shaggier," Shin said idly. "I'm a long way from becoming one of the beautiful people."

Yuuki knew his friend wasn't being sarcastic, but Shin smiled sheepishly. Once upon a time, he *had* been one of the "beautiful people," or so the girls said. But

they were never really praising his appearance. Instead, they said it in disparaging tones, revenge for all the times he brushed them off.

Yuuki was only average height, but he inherited his mother's delicate bone structure and white skin. Even now, at age twenty-five, he didn't exactly reek of masculinity.

Back in the day, Shin always reminded him that beauty was "skin deep," and complained that Yuuki was too timid. Yuuki looked at the familiar face across the counter.

In some ways, we're the same now as we were then, he thought.

Yuuki remembered their school days, when he used to think Shin was so arrogant. The way he bowed his head as he sipped a juice box, sweat dripping off his face. Shin was on the soccer team and jogged daily around the field. Not only had the female team manager hit on him, but Shin always had some girl at his beck and call.

Once Yuuki had secretly obsessed about Shin's bronze skin and his toned body. But in the seven years since graduation, their friendship had grown into a comfortable thing.

"You've been staying open later than usual, haven't you?" Shin commented. "Why not close up a little sooner?"

"Whatever. It's not like I have something better to do."

"Hey, hey, no need to be such a martyr about it."

Yuuki had inherited Fuuka from his grandparents.

The café did most of its business at lunch and dinner. Since they rolled up the sidewalks pretty early in the country, customers were few and far between after eight o'clock.

After Yuuki took over the place four years ago, high school students started dropping by on their way home from cram school. Before that, his grandparents closed earlier so other neighborhood business owners could gather there for nightly bull sessions.

No one was likely to come knocking once he hung out the "closed" sign, plus the kitchen was cleaned out. Feeling grumpy and bored, Shin toyed with his cigarette pack and glanced at Yuuki's face.

She's not here anymore. There's nothing more for you to do, Yuuki wanted to tell him.

But instead he said, "Had enough to eat? I could throw together an appetizer. You look like you're up for a couple of drinks."

"That's okay, I'm full. Mind if I take a bath?"

"No problem."

Yawning, Shin trotted through the kitchen and into the house. In contrast to the way he hooked his thumbs under his belt like an old geezer, the nimble footwork he once displayed on the soccer field was still in working order.

Yuuki watched Shin exit the shop. Then, humming to himself, he locked the front door, stacked dishes and silverware, wiped off tables. After topping off the seasoning shakers, he quickly swept the floor and set the chairs around the tables.

Last, he checked the refrigerator, making a list

for the next morning. Feeling satisfied to be finally done, he glanced at the clock. Ten-thirty.

Yuuki peered out the dark window. During the day he could see the peaks of Mount Asahidake, but at this time of night there was only darkness. Yuuki had to imagine the mountain in his mind's eye.

But such scenery, the sublime work of Mother Nature, didn't appeal to him all that much. This room with a view had a heavy price tag attached, and Yuuki had come to hate it.

"I'm beat," he muttered, walking through the kitchen and into the house.

To his right was a western-style living room. In the old days, his grandparents drank tea there after hours. Back then, Yuuki only worked for them part-time, so they had rarely asked him to join them.

Now Shin had plopped himself down like he owned the place, sprawled on the floor in his underwear. His cheeks were still pink from his bath.

"Put something on or you'll catch cold," Yuuki warned.

"I'm okay. It's the only way to deal with the heat."

With a towel draped around his neck and fanning his face with his hands, Shin looked like he did in high school. He would hit the showers after soccer practice, then wander down the hallways naked from the waist up. The teachers would get steamed and he'd lead them on a merry chase. Yuuki had witnessed his antics on a number of occasions.

"Sano?"

"Eh?" Yuuki said.

He looked over at Shin, who held up a can of beer.

"Want one?"

"No, that's okay. I'm taking a bath."

Ever since he came here to live after his grandparents moved away, Yuuki still sought out the lingering ghost of a man who had once sprawled on the floor just like Shin.

There were two cans of beer on the coffee table. One was already empty, so Shin must already be on his second.

Yuuki never slept well with alcohol in his system. He used to drink instead of using sleeping pills, but not anymore. He never felt like he had to drink to keep Shin company. It wasn't that kind of relationship.

He took off his oily apron and undid his ponytail, running his fingers through his fragrant hair. After handling food all day, a wide variety of scents soaked into him, and Yuuki couldn't really relax until he'd scrubbed them all off.

But washing his hair every night was a pain. Shorter hair would be so much easier, but Yuuki still had no urge to get out the scissors.

"I'll be in Shihoro starting tomorrow," Shin called out to him. "We keep getting more overtime. I might not be able to get back on weekends."

"For how long?"

"Probably a month. Oh, look, you did it again."

"Again?" Yuuki asked, looking puzzled.

Shin tiredly got to his feet and grabbed Yuuki's

wrist, knocking him off balance.

"Hey, what the—"

"Show me your hand," Shin said, dragging him to the coffee table.

Yuuki sat down unsteadily as Shin held his chapped hand. Just as Yuuki was about to tell him to cut it out, Shin softly touched his cheeks, tracing the contours of his face. The unspoken boundaries between them began to dissolve.

Shin was waiting for more than the workday to end. On some level Yuuki knew this, yet worried that it might just be wishful thinking on his part. The psychological ground here was treacherous, and no good would come if he lost his footing, though getting swept away emotionally would be a nice change.

And yet when it came to crossing that wavering line, Yuuki still hesitated.

"You should put something on that," Shin nagged.

"Ah—"

"You're always doing this," Shin muttered, like an obnoxious brother-in-law. He went over to a low hutch and found a tube of hand cream, squirted some out, and then rubbed it on Yuuki's hand.

"You should do this after you do the dishes," he said. "Then you won't get all chapped."

"Hey, what are you doing? That feels weird," Yuuki giggled, squirming a little, but he didn't resist. Shin's firm touch made Yuuki feel uneasy, so he tried to pretend that they were just fooling around.

Shin's fingers were not that dexterous, but he deeply worked the cream into Yuuki's cuticles. Yuuki started to feel a bit flushed.

"That feel good?" Shin asked.

"I told you, it feels weird. Enough already. I'm taking a bath," Yuuki said. Suddenly he looked wistful.

"What? Out with it."

"I already said."

"Must have missed it."

Their words jumbled together as Yuuki gently pulled his hand away. He knew how quickly things could change when one human being touched another.

"I'm taking a bath. You might as well hit the sack."

"Nah, I'll wait up. Let's have a drink together."

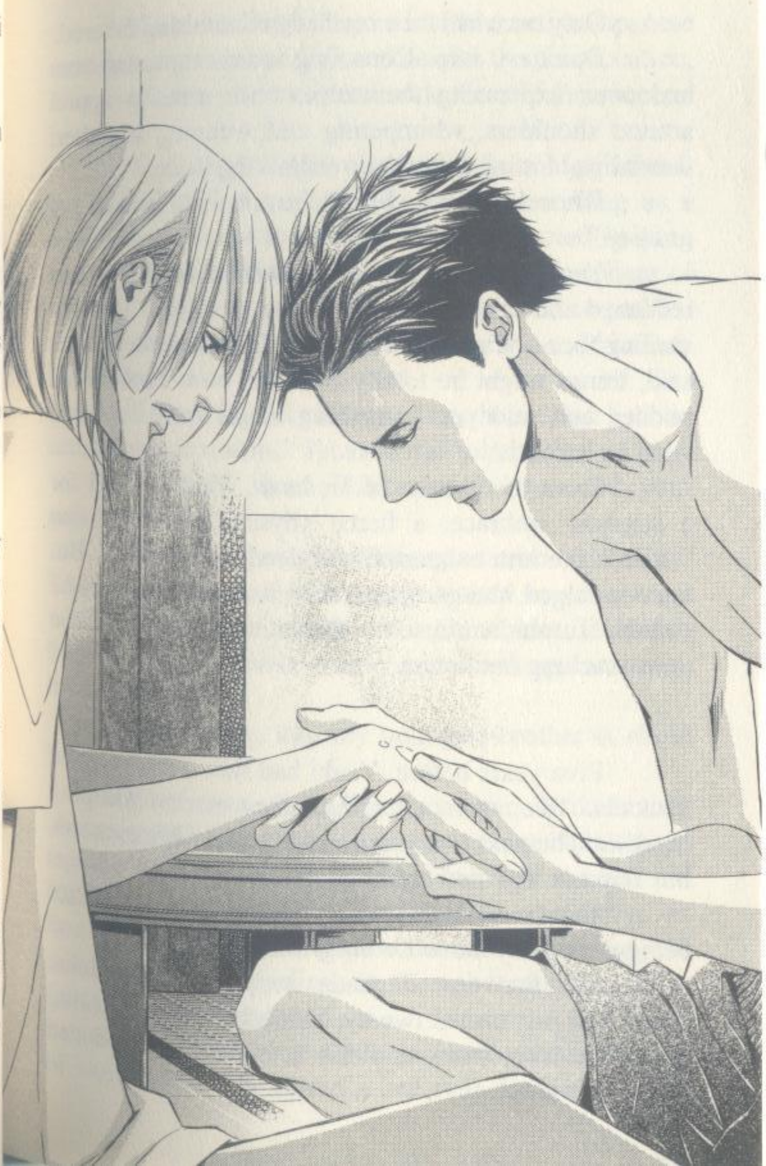
"If you're still awake."

They used to drink together when Shin got off work. Being in no condition to drive, Shin would stay overnight. Several months ago, he started drinking at Yuuki's place on a regular basis. Now Yuuki made sure to keep his refrigerator stocked with beer.

He had room to spare, after all. And since he lived alone, there were no family members to complain when a friend crashed at his place. And Shin was just a friend, of course.

From purely logical standpoint, it was no big deal that Shin often spent the night, but the truth and the hypothetical truth twined their cords around Yuuki's heart. The term "friend" helped him make sense of it all.

This is the first time I've seen you get emotional like that.



Only once had their brotherly relationship faltered.

Don't cry now. Consoling words repeated over and over, expressing themselves with arms wrapped around shoulders, whimpering and weeping together, warm lips blotting away the overflowing tears…

What do you say, Yuuki? Just once, to help us get to sleep?

Yuuki had stared at him speechlessly. His friend reddened and smiled and said it was all a joke. Had his smiling face not swallowed up words that needed to be said, things might be totally different now. Had Yuuki nodded and said yes, something might have replaced what he had lost.

From the bottom of his heart, Yuuki hoped for a stronger embrace, a fierce physical affection that would leave him exhausted and dead to the world. But once indulged, the pampered soul became weak, so he couldn't surrender himself to the enticing promise of the arms reaching out to him.

Five years before, Yuuki had met a man named Tsukada. Two years after that, they started sleeping together. The next two years had felt like a honeymoon, but Tsukada had died a year ago.

You know, kid, hanging around here feels like being around my mom. Or my grandma.

The first time Tsukada stepped inside Fuuka, Yuuki had just turned twenty. Tsukada had been eating at convenience stores, until his boss finally introduced him to this place.

Thanks to Yuuki's grandmother, native Japanese cuisine was their specialty, and despite the poor location, many men away on business made the café their second home.

Yuuki had already graduated from high school, but failed to find a good job. He was working as a temp, living hand-to-mouth, when he started helping his grandparents. Fuuka had the relaxed atmosphere of a family business, and at first Yuuki pitched in just for the fun of it. Two years later, they finally lured him into the kitchen.

"I have lots of siblings at my house, but I never see my grandparents," Tsukada had told him.

"So why does Fuuka remind you of your grandmother's?"

"Because that's what I *imagine* it would be like," Tsukada said happily. His smile looked so carefree, it was hard to believe he was seven years older. Tsukada's baby face and amiable manner were in sharp contrast to his large frame.

"You know, kid, my youngest brother is about your age."

Ever since their first encounter, Tsukada had always called him "kid." And when they hadn't been together for a while, he would come right out and tell Yuuki he missed him, with no shyness whatsoever. At first Yuuki didn't know what to do with a man who was so honest about his feelings, but he was soon swept off his feet by a surge of emotion.

"I dumped my dumb job and got kicked out of the house. My parents are real hard-asses like that," Tsukada confessed.

During his college years, he'd been obsessed with mountain climbing.

"But as soon as I started running the old rat race, vacations were impossible. I finally ended up looking for a career change," Tsukada laughed, scratching his head.

His meager income from his job at a climbing equipment store made it more of an avocation than anything else. But Tsukada had a fierce desire to do anything connected with the sport. And when he did, his eyes sparkled like a child's.

"I love the mountains so much that I ran out of patience with "normal" life. And this is how I turned out. My store manager is made of the same stuff. It's a kick, even working for peanuts."

According to Tsukada, having his income cut in half was not a big deal. He wasn't cut out to be a salaryman, and Yuuki couldn't even imagine him in a suit. Tsukada's uniform was tattered jeans and a faded polo shirt, topped by a smock with the store's logo silk-screened in neon colors. He wore it without complaint, even in sweltering weather.

To a single child like Yuuki, Tsukada seemed like an older brother at first. But soon his old high school classmates started to seem dull by comparison.

"What a waste!" Tsukada exclaimed, when Yuuki's grandparents decided to close the café. Why couldn't they just pass it on Yuuki?

"But I'm not even half as good a cook as my grandma," Yuuki had protested.

"You can get good. Give yourself a crash course

and get some skills!"

Yuuki didn't feel like looking for another job, so with Tsukada spurring him on, he took up the reins and climbed into the saddle. It was Tsukada's idea to keep his grandmother's traditional Japanese menu, and then later transition to lighter meals like pasta.

"C'mon, Tsukada-san! You're just worried you won't have a place to eat."

"No, no, no. That's not it at all!" Tsukada insisted.

For someone who had trouble boiling water, Tsukada definitely had a refined palate. Every night after closing, he would perch on a stool and grade Yuuki's concoctions on a steep curve.

Going back to his cheap apartment became a bother, so Tsukada ended up spending at least half the week at Fuuka.

"Why don't you sleep at your girlfriend's place?" Yuuki asked one day, an innocent question that completely changed their relationship.

Without batting an eye, Tsukada made his sexual orientation quite clear. He also made clear that any feelings expressed in his direction would not drive him away. Since Tsukada had been so honest, Yuuki didn't feel like he had to dance around the subject.

"Why didn't you tell me before?" he asked.

"Truth be told, having feelings for a guy my kid brother's age is a bit, shall we say, complicated."

"What kind of feelings?"

Tsukada said he loved him, but Yuuki couldn't grasp the full impact of those words, having no experience with romance. In the meantime, they began sleeping together on a regular basis, wrapped in each other's arms. Moaning, at the mercy of his pleasures, Tsukada shed his usual cocky manner. That convinced Yuuki that Tsukada felt real love and affection for him.

But now no one sat at the counter looking at that view through the window. The year had gone by in a flash. On a clear day, Yuuki could see the snow-covered mountain peaks. Somewhere within that majestic tableau, an avalanche had taken Tsukada away from him.

When the first accident reports came in, Yuuki was speechless. It had to be a lie. How could Tsukada be dead?

This past January, he marked that fatal anniversary on his new calendar.

As if I would ever forget the day he died, he thought bitterly to himself.

As the day approached, Yuuki found himself plagued by insomnia. He had gone through the last year in a frenzied haze. Now that he had time to look back, the past weighed heavily upon him.

At closing time on the last day of April, he tore off the page on his calendar and threw it away, uncovering the day he never wanted to think about. He ran his finger over the mark he'd made. That day was coming. Just then Shin showed up on his way home from work.

"Can you whip up a little something for me?"

"Shin—"

Though he was playing the role of customer, Shin looked more depressed than Yuuki had ever seen him. Even his voice sounded flat.

"I'll sit here," Shin muttered. He grabbed the stool Yuuki had stowed in back to keep people from sitting on it.

"It's not doing any good there in the kitchen," Shin said, untroubled by the shadow of the man who haunted it.

He set down the chair in Tsukada's favorite spot, at the end of the counter, then sat down.

"That's where—"

"I know, but I want to sit here."

The space that had been empty for so long was now filled by his old classmate. Yuuki felt tears welling up in his eyes.

"This is the first time I've seen you get emotional like this."

Shin hurried behind the counter and pulled Yuuki to him. Before Yuuki could push him away, the warmth of human touch started to melt his icy heart.

"Why—?"

Shin and Tsukada had undoubtedly run into each other here, but Shin had never spoken of it.

So why now? wondered Yuuki, looking at his friend.

"Because we've known each other a long time," Shin said. "When last month rolled around, you still had a smile on your face. Last week your mood definitely went south. Now it's scraping rock bottom."

He traced the dark circles under Yuuki's eyes with his fingers.

"You haven't been sleeping," he said. "I'm going to pop by here every day from now on."

They were old classmates who bickered and fought all the time, and then all of a sudden, Shin changed. He thumped Yuuki firmly on his shoulders.

"Sano!" he barked.

"Hey, that hurts," Yuuki chuckled, smiling despite everything.

"Sorry," Shin apologized, wrapping his arms around him. It was the only way he knew how to console someone. Like a child, he hugged Yuuki tighter and tighter.

"Shin?" Yuuki called out, stepping out of the tub. He pulled his pajamas over his still-steaming body.

Shin had promised to wait up, but was snoring on the floor.

"Oh, good grief," Yuuki said, rolling his eyes.

Since he started working at the crack of dawn, Shin usually nodded off early like this. No matter how many times Yuuki took him to task, his gripes went in one ear and out the other.

"I keep telling you you'll catch cold. When will it sink in?" Yuuki muttered, giving him a soft kick.

"Umm," Shin mumbled drowsily.

"Shin," Yuuki repeated, squatting next to him. "Shin."

There was no reaction, which was just as well. Yuuki touched Shin's mouth. It seemed like only yesterday when Shin's lips had accidentally touched his cheek. That moment had been buried in Yuuki's

thoughts, but he couldn't recall the memory without recalling the regret.

"Shin—"

Flesh touching flesh wasn't that big a deal, except when the person was your friend. But Yuuki wasn't being honest, to Shin or to himself. Hiding behind a cloak of reason, he neither welcomed Shin all the way in, nor pushed him all the way out. If climbing over that barrier was too painful, he should have just closed the door in the first place.

Yuuki looked at sleeping Shin and sighed. Their relationship went on like this because he didn't want to lose someone he felt at home with, a friend he could talk to about anything.

What would they have done back in high school? What if their relationship had turned down this road before he met Tsukada? What if Shin hadn't been the friend he'd known forever?

But months of trying to ignore the desire, interrupted by unexpected gestures, grew tiring after a while. As Shin became a bigger part of his life, Yuuki's feverish body often whispered sweet nothings to his senses. If he actually listened to his body, that would be that. Problem solved. In any case, being this close to Shin and still holding back was sweet torture.

"Shin."

"Hmmm."

"Wake up and go to bed. I'll get you a futon," Yuuki said, going to the closet. He spread the futon on the floor, not bothering to smooth out the creases. Shin was only a friend, after all…

Chapter 2

Fuuka was set back from the main road and didn't really advertise that much. It would be hard to find a more inconvenient location for a restaurant.

The café was originally the home of Yuuki's grandparents, and far from the main shopping district. New faces rarely popped up among the regulars, so Yuuki was surprised to see a customer as soon as he opened for business. Usually only the locals came in alone during the odd hours between breakfast and lunch.

"Welcome to Fuuka," Yuuki called out.

The traditional greeting had become a Pavlovian response tied to the bell above the door. Yuuki glanced at the customer. He didn't just come in for directions. The man looked at the clock on the wall and then sat in a booth. Yuuki brought him a glass of water.

"Welcome to Fuuka," he said again, hovering beside the table. *Will you be dining alone?* was usually his next question, but he hesitated. Somebody in the neighborhood had probably recommended the place and would be joining him soon. Suddenly the bright yellow backpack at the man's feet caught his eye. It was a brand specifically for mountain climbers. Yuuki hadn't noticed it when the man entered. Tsukada had owned one just like it.

"H-here you go," Yuuki said, setting down a glass of water with trembling hands.

"You can see this fluorescent yellow even in the middle of a forest," Tsukada had once told him. "Drop it in a swamp, no problem."

Remembering Tsukada's cheerful pillow talk gave Yuuki goosebumps.

Slung across his back, the yellow backpack was set off by Tsukada's bronzed skin. Because it was a lighter pack used for day trips, it hadn't been damaged in the avalanche. In Yuuki's memory, it looked just like the one at the man's feet. Tsukada's had been returned to his parents as a memento.

"Got a menu?"

"What? Oh, yes," Yuuki said hastily, pulling a menu out from under his arm. His cheeks reddened, but the customer didn't seem to notice as he scanned the choices.

The longer Yuuki looked at him, the more out of place this customer seemed. Fuuka was on the way to Asahidake, so it wasn't unusual for mountain climbers to stop in. But though the man had the backpack, he wore the kind of casual street clothing found at any store in the neighborhood.

Even during the summer, the harsh environment of the northern ranges often included freezing temperatures, and no one would attempt an ascent without rain gear. The man's dirty sweatshirt was coated with road dust, and his faded jeans were worn out in the knees. He definitely didn't look like he'd be climbing any mountains, not with those old sneakers, but his backpack was bursting at the seams.

His unshaven face and unkempt hair made him look all the more suspect. He could have been one of those students who hitchhiked from coast to coast, but this guy looked over thirty.

There wasn't a car in the parking space out front. Once he finished eating, the man would probably want to know about the next bus to the station. Yuuki tried to remember where he put the bus schedule.

"When you've decided, give me a holler," Yuuki said, turning to leave.

"Ah, just a minute."

"Yes?"

Though there weren't all that many items on the menu, it was several pages long.

This guy knows what he wants, Yuuki thought.

"You make the desserts yourself?"

"No. A local bakery does."

"Oh. Well, fine, then."

His first question out of the gate threw Yuuki off his usual stride. The man started ordering dishes off every page, one after another.

"The Japanese-style plum pasta with wild basil."

"Yes."

"The Bolognese pasta with peperoncino. The mushroom risotto. And the hashed beef with rice."

"Y-yes."

"The shrimp pilaf. The grated radish hamburger. And the grilled chicken sandwich."

"Ah, um—"

It suddenly occurred to Yuuki that the man was reading off each menu item in order.

"You're not ordering everything on the menu, are you?"

"That's exactly what I'm doing. I want you to cook everything you've got."

Was this guy pulling his leg? Or planning to stiff him on the bill?

Yuuki was completely stumped. They weren't exactly in the middle of nowhere, but if a scuffle broke out, no one would come running. On the other hand, maybe he could call the cops from the kitchen.

Yuuki visualized himself standing behind the counter, quietly grabbing a knife so the man wouldn't notice.

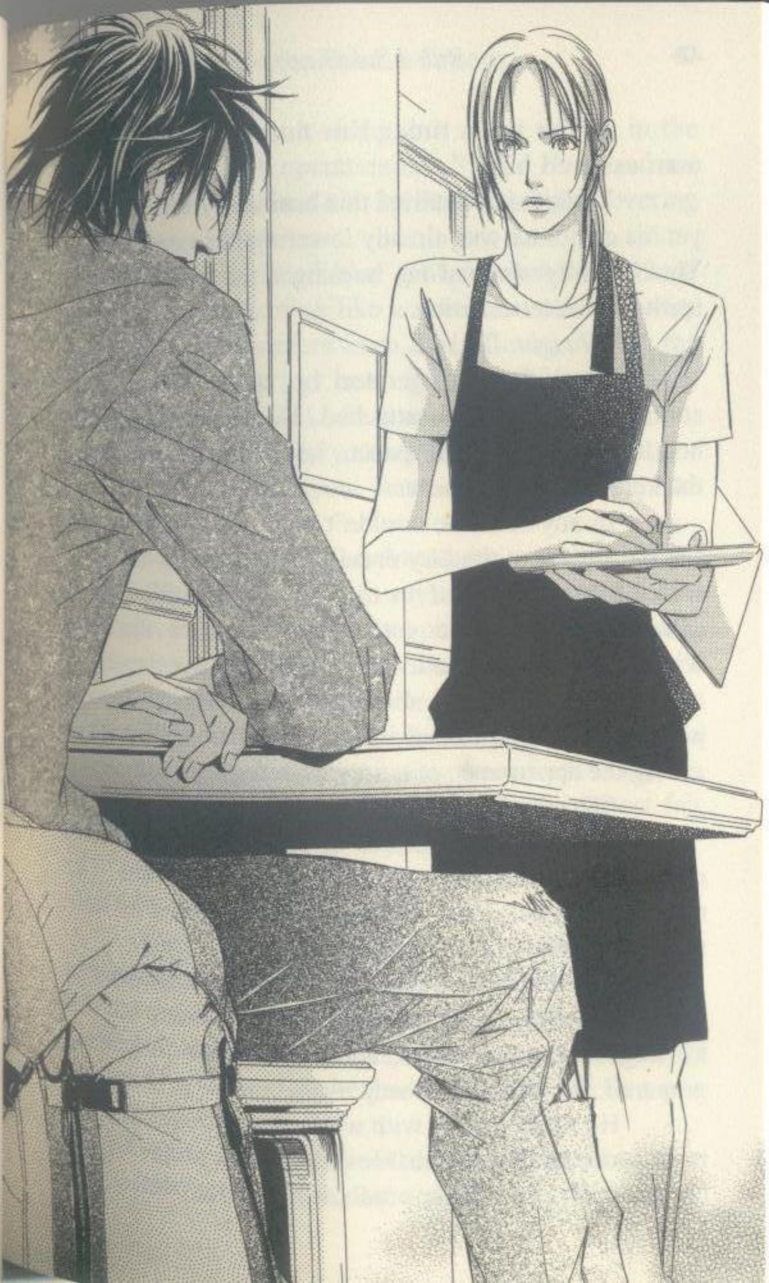
As if reading Yuuki's thoughts, the man riffled through his backpack. Was he searching for a weapon? Yuuki was about to beat a fast retreat when the man produced a sheaf of ten-thousand yen notes.

"Hey, it's okay. I have money. I won't eat and run. So cook up the whole order. If you don't trust me, I'll pay up front."

"Eh?"

No matter how hearty an appetite this man had, there was no way he could eat his way through this meal at one sitting. Yuuki still didn't understand what he was up to, but at least he wasn't going to get stiffed.

Puzzling this over, he returned to the kitchen and put a pot of water on to boil. Since he usually worked alone, he was pretty sure he could pull this off, once he found his rhythm. He felt the man's eyes burning into his back all the way to the kitchen.



"Take your time. I'm not in a hurry," the man assured him.

Yuuki hadn't started this business yesterday, and yet his customer was already lowering his expectations. Yuuki lightly slapped his burning cheeks and grit his teeth with determination.

All right. Let's go.

From the refrigerator he took out a pasta container with a scale attached. He always used thin noodles for the plum pasta, but wanted something thicker for the Bolognese.

In any case, he couldn't cook everything at the same time. He started by dressing the flesh of the plum with green perilla leaf in the style of a chilled pasta salad. The Bolognese was simmered from the start with parmesan cheese to bring out the sweetness and *umami.* He sautéed the sliced garlic in olive oil for the peperoncino, then tossed in some slender red peppers, giving the appearance of a fireworks display.

"Thanks for waiting."

Carrying three dishes at once, Yuuki suddenly realized he'd forgotten to set out the silverware. The man smirked as he bustled about, but Yuuki had no time to take offense.

As he stir-fried the rice in the same frying pan used to sauté the garlic, sweat beaded on his brows. But he forgot the mushrooms, and by the time they were prepared, the rice had already turned mushy.

He filled a bowl with white rice and added some meat sauce from a pouch. He only used a prepackaged, commercially-available product for meat sauce and shrimp pilaf. It wasn't cheap, but saved money in the long run for a small operation like Fuuka. He rinsed out the risotto pan and used it to fry the hamburger, covering it with a warm glaze.

As he finished the grilled sandwich, Yuuki realized he was panting like a marathon runner. Every noon, he handled orders from several customers at the same time. So why was he so tired now? He felt sweat trickling down the back of his neck.

"S-sorry to keep you waiting."

"Why don't you have a seat?" the man suggested.

A mountain of dishes awaited him in the kitchen. Yuuki's first impulse was to say no, but there was still time before the lunch rush. Stopping to catch his breath, he felt about to fall over. But he bowed to the man's request and sat across from him.

Without a word the man arranged the dishes across the table, seeming to rank them from "best" to "worst." But the man ate so quietly, Yuuki almost felt like pouting.

"Huh," the man would grunt now and then.

"Huh?"

Yuuki's eyes opened wider, fearing that something distasteful had touched the man's palate. His heart beat faster. The fatigue was fading, but sitting here was not a pleasant experience. He was about to stand up and head back to the kitchen, when the man lifted a piece of chicken to his mouth.

"When did you slice the lemon?" he asked.

"Lemon? Um, ah, last night."

"And stored it in a plastic container, right?"

"Y-yes."

"Smells like it. A glass container is better. Fresh lemon should be prepared every morning."

"Yes?"

Though he looked like a homeless person, the man possessed the air of a gourmet. Yuuki lacked the confidence to lash back at him. The way the man whittled away at the food on each plate was proof of his discerning tongue.

He ate almost a third of the pasta and risotto, but the rice pilaf and hashed beef barely came in contact with his taste buds. Yuuki was sure he must be stuffed by now, but from the way the guy was gobbling the burger, he must still have room down there. No doubt he would detect the ready-made portion of the meal.

The man sniffed the grated radish sauce on the burger. A deep crease appeared between his brows.

"Same frying pan as the risotto, huh?"

"Yes," Yuuki admitted.

"This sauce is Japanese-style. The scent of olive oil is too intrusive. You should use separate frying pans."

Whatever, Yuuki thought.

Fuuka just didn't have that many pots and pans. What the hell did this guy expect out here in the sticks? He was about ask him directly when the man suggested that Yuuki hire him.

"What?"

"You have a 'Help Wanted' sign out front."

"For a waitress."

"Sorry to say this, but your methods are a mess. And your use of ingredients is amateurish."

"Hey!"

Why was this guy he'd never seen before giving him lip? If he hadn't been a customer, he would have clocked him. Yuuki didn't exactly have the means to write off a bill worth several thousand yen. But this guy had certainly drop-kicked civility out the window.

"Thanks, but no thanks. This kind of place doesn't really need a professional chef," Yuuki said politely.

Who the hell are you? he wanted to say, taking the guy's attitude down a notch.

But the guy didn't seem to give a damn one way or another, and slowly got to his feet.

"I'd like to borrow your bath," he said.

"My bath?"

"I'm in no condition to be standing in the kitchen."

"W-wait a minute!"

The man ignored him and quickly threaded his way through the tables. That was when Yuuki noticed that something about him was amiss.

This complete stranger dragged his right foot as he walked. He moved briskly because of his long legs, but his body listed to the right with every step. A climber couldn't have a bum leg. Did he have an accident on the mountain, too? Yuuki's heart thumped in his chest.

"In here?" the man asked, opening the door to the house. He found the bathroom and started to take off his clothes right there in the hallway.

"H-hey!' Yuuki yelled, gaping at him in amazement.

Maybe this guy really was up to no good. A cold shiver ran down his back and his knees trembled.

"Like I said, I just wanted to borrow the bath."

"You said the bath?"

"You like looking at naked men or something?"

Yuuki suddenly realized that the man he was staring at was stark naked. Not that there was anything wrong with that, but his cheeks turned bright red.

"You're the one standing here naked!"

"I can't take a bath with my clothes on, can I?"

"You—" Yuuki sputtered. He lunged forward with every intent of dragging the guy's sorry ass out of there, but the bathroom door slammed in his face. Yuuki just stood there for a minute, gaping with disbelief. Finally his brain circuitry rebooted and he came to his senses again. The police! He was about to head back to the shop, when the door behind him opened.

"The shower's cold. How do you adjust the temperature?"

"Ah, um, sorry. It's an old water heater. The valve on the right."

"Got it," the man said, slamming the door again.

Yuuki slid down the wall until he was squatting on the floor. A damp footprint was on the floor, made by his right foot. Other long marks streaked across the dark grain of the hardwood floor, like a snake had slithered down the hallway.

A cold chill swept through Yuuki's body. The scars where the man's torn flesh had been sewn back together had an eerie luster about them. Just how

wounded was he? How many side effects did he suffer? Was he still in pain? Yuuki just sat there, ruminating over the possibilities, unable to even stand up.

Shadows wavered through the glass door. This man from nowhere had taken over his bathroom. Suddenly Yuuki saw the absurdity of it all.

"Hey, grab me a towel!" the guy barked out the door.

Yuuki staggered to his feet, fetched a towel from the closet, and handed it over. The man vigorously dried himself off, his hair dripping wet. Then he shook his head like a dog, sending water flying everywhere. Without a hint of self-consciousness, he wrapped the towel around his midsection.

"Have you seen some clean underwear around here?" the man said casually.

He wanted to borrow that, too? He must be joking. Yuuki compared his willowy frame to the man's muscular physique and frowned. Neither a lender or borrower be, the old saying went. But in for a penny, in for a pound, and now he was along for the ride, no matter how costly the fare might be.

"Oh, never mind. I have some," the man said, pulling some white briefs from his backpack. They were the plain kind, not even high school kids wore them these days. Yuuki couldn't help but smile, but his smile quickly faded when the man pulled out a neatly-folded chef's smock and slacks.

"Are you a—" Yuuki gasped.

"Huh?"

Only chefs with years of experience wore uniforms like that. This man must be way more respectable than the grungy creature he appeared to be. As Yuuki wondered what to say now, the man took out a long white cylinder.

"This might not fit, since your kitchen ceiling is so low."

The chef's hat was at least eight inches tall. Though the kitchen ceiling had never been a problem for Yuuki or his grandparents, if this guy put on that hat, it would definitely hit the ceiling fan.

The man wasn't trying to be disagreeable, but he still rubbed Yuuki the wrong way. He had scared him half to death by barging into his house, and now all this fuss about the hat was pissing Yuuki off.

"So don't wear it then."

"But my head will miss it."

That stupid hat should be the least of your concerns, Yuuki thought, glaring at him. He was about to make a snappy retort, when the man took a bandana from his backpack and tied it around his head.

"Well, them's the breaks. This will have to do."

Just like that, his appearance changed from master chef to fry cook.

"I'll be borrowing your kitchen."

"Whatever floats your boat," Yuuki snapped back.

The man crossed in front of him and headed back to the café. Yuuki considered leaving him to his own devices, but if a customer happened to walk in, he'd be screwed. So he hurried after him.

"Can I borrow a pair of sandals?" the man asked.

"Sure, sure."

The man's tattered sneakers and Yuuki's kitchen shoes were lined up in the *genkon* between the house and café. The sneakers were caked with dust, but Yuuki's shoes would never fit the man's feet. Yuuki pointed at some sandals in the corner. They seemed to be the only option.

"You'll change your mind once you have a taste," the man promised.

"Doesn't matter. I'm still not hiring you," Yuuki said calmly, but inside he was seething with anger.

The intimidating difference in their height made Yuuki feel inadequate. He stared at the man, looking for his faults, but soon grew interested in spite of himself.

"To start with, let's straighten up around here," the man said briskly.

The kitchen was organized around a central island, but it was pretty cramped for a large man. The man muttered to himself as he cleared the decks. It was easy to tell that he had years of experience.

"You don't have a reach-in refrigerator?" he asked innocently.

At least he's not sneering, Yuuki thought. A restaurant with only two regular refrigerators couldn't amount to much.

"I'll take this chicken thigh."

"Fine."

"Fresh tomatoes or puree?"

"There's both, but—"

"Show me."

Yuuki handed the man a cardboard box of

tomatoes. The man grabbed a can of tomato puree from a shelf and studied it carefully, then put on a pot of water to boil.

"These tomatoes look pretty good. If you don't mind—"

"Not at all."

Yuuki could tell he knew what he was doing simply from the way he steamed the tomatoes, but he just held his tongue and watched.

"Have any stock?" the man asked.

"Are bouillon cubes okay?"

His long-suffering sigh made Yuuki want to smack him.

The man lined up olive oil and spices next to the stove and heated the frying pan.

"Would you get the bouillon ready for me?"

At some point, Yuuki had gone from owner-chef to student. As directed, he simmered the bouillon in a small saucepan and waited for his next instructions. The man sliced garlic into the olive oil and gently sautéed it, making sure it didn't burn. He deboned the chicken thigh and dropped it into the pan, then browned it on both sides.

"Can I use this plate?"

"Sure."

The man placed the fricasseed chicken on a plain white plate, then poured the tomatoes into the frying pan, quickly cutting them with the spatula.

"Now pour in the bouillon," he directed, turning up the flame.

"Okay."

The man added some salt and pepper, and then poured the sauce over the chicken.

"Time for a taste," he said, grabbing a fork.

He cut a juicy piece from the center, stabbed it with the fork, and held it in front of Yuuki's mouth. For a moment, Yuuki wondered whether he should pluck it off with his fingers or hold out a plate.

In the end, he simply opened his mouth wide. The man chuckled, but it was too late to worry about that. The tender meat slipped into his mouth.

"This is delicious," Yuuki gasped.

He could hardly believe that something so good had come from his own kitchen. The rich flavor fairly exploded inside his mouth, a performance that could hardly have been imagined from the price of the ticket.

"Since the tomatoes were fresh, they didn't need sweetening," the man explained.

"I bought those at a neighborhood market this morning."

Yuuki eagerly grabbed a knife and fork and divvied up the chicken. Come to think about it, he hadn't bothered with breakfast today.

An empty stomach makes for the sweetest meal, but even on a full stomach, this flavor would be unbeatable. Painful as it was to admit, this man definitely had the chops.

"You like it?"

"Yeah."

"Well, then. Hire me."

"Um…"

His food was definitely delicious, but hiring him was a tiger of a different stripe. The fact was, Yuuki simply couldn't afford a chef like him, no matter how much moonlighting he did on the side.

"I'm really sorry but—" Yuuki stalled, trying to think of a way to let the guy down easy. Staring down at the empty plate, he ran through all the usual excuses in his mind.

Your skills are out of joint with this kind of joint. You don't belong way out here in the sticks.

Maybe Yuuki could just tickle the man's professional pride. Just as he was about to do that, the man said something completely out of left field.

"I'll work for minimum wage."

"Huh?"

"Just like it says on your sign. Four hours a day, minimum wage. I'll settle for that."

"Ahh, but—" Yuuki stammered, searching for a reply.

Did the guy even know basic math? Even Yuuki wouldn't work for that piddling amount. As Yuuki scratched his chin, the man grabbed his wrist.

"Sorry," he apologized, but he didn't let go. "Looks like you chew your fingernails."

Yuuki had no such childish habits, but didn't feel like sticking up for himself just then. The man looked him over.

"The mountain—" he started to say, then closed his mouth.

"The mountain?"

"You can see Mount Asahidake from here, right?"

Of course. He wanted to be where he could see the mountain. Yuuki glanced out the window. The view that vanished at night was as clear as day in good weather.

"I can't go climbing with this leg, but I'd like to be close to the mountains."

The one place where Yuuki would never go. The mountains were within his reach and yet forever removed from his touch. He was forced to live that view day in and day out.

Gazing vacantly out the window, the man let go of Yuuki's wrist and smiled.

A wave of nostalgia washed over Yuuki, the same feelings he had whenever he thought about the avalanche.

Tsukada's skin had been mottled with dark patches, which he said were only snow burns. Yuuki always sighed whenever he compared his pale arm to Tsukada's dark, firm one.

"It looks firm to you? You're hardly flabby yourself," Tsukada had said.

"But skinny's just skinny. Not the same as being ripped."

"I put on muscle without really trying," Tsukada shrugged.

Yuuki's skinny arms had the bare minimum in muscles, and he yelped like a girl whenever Tsukada pinched an inch of his flesh. Several minutes later, on their bed, that yelping turned to sighs of pleasure.

This man had Tsukada's scent about him. He was the same size, the same strength. Bit by bit the splintered pieces of Yuuki's memories started to fall into place.

"But—"

"Do you have a spare room? If you're worried about giving me minimum wage, you could throw in room and board."

Put that way, the money problem disappeared. Yuuki could still say he needed references, though. No one would fault him for giving the heave-ho to someone who showed up unannounced, sniped at his cooking, and took over his bathroom to boot.

The man pulled off the bandanna. His wet hair stood up in silly-looking spikes.

"That head of yours," Yuuki said, trying not to smile.

"Looks kind of funny?"

Yuuki suddenly burst out laughing, which cast his reservations to the wind.

"The house is small, but I do have an extra room," Yuuki admitted.

Right now, he used it for storage. After his grandparents moved in with his parents, they told him they didn't care what he did with it.

"Then we'll call it a deal," the man said, smiling broadly. He stuck out his right hand.

"I'm Kamishiro. First name, Keiichi. Here's my resume."

Yuuki read the meticulous résumé with amazement. This guy had been a chef for over ten years.

"There aren't any hotels or *ryokan* around here," Kamishiro explained. "If I didn't find anything today, I was prepared to live off the land. Letting me use your room is a real lifesaver."

Anyone who looked as grungy as this guy would be hauled away for vagrancy. And even though it was summer, the temperature still got down to the low fifties at night.

Was he foolish—or heroic? He definitely didn't give a damn about how he looked. But Kamishiro still seemed a little on his guard, despite his kicked-back attitude.

"Is that all your luggage?"

"I like to travel light."

Just like Tsukada, this stranger had stepped into his café with a yellow backpack. But how would Shin react when he found out they were living together? The man obviously needed a place to stay. The situation weighed on Yuuki's mind, but he couldn't send him away just yet.

"This would be a good time to rework the menu," Kamishiro suggested.

Déjà vu all over again. He and Tsukada had developed the menu that so obviously displeased Kamishiro. Yuuki didn't answer him at first.

"Is that a no?"

"Ah, no. I mean, whatever. If you want to change it, go ahead."

If anyone else had suggested it, Yuuki would have been outraged. But if this guy said so, he must know his stuff.

"Your menu is fine. I could pull it off with my eyes closed," Kamishiro shrugged, seeming to give in.

Yuuki looked at him. He had just hired a five-star chef and also let him move in. Maybe he should call Shin and let him know about this sudden new turn of events.

As he tried to figure out what to tell him, Yuuki's expression darkened. Was this really something he could toss off in a casual chat on the phone?

"Once I get unpacked, I'll man the kitchen. That okay with you?"

"Is my cooking really that bad?"

"Let's just say you're not that great."

That evening, he would contact Shin. But as he and Kamishiro got to know each other, Yuuki couldn't stop thinking about that phone call.

Chapter 3

"How's work going?" Shin was asking over the phone.

Yuuki hadn't heard from him in a while, and hadn't gotten around to calling him. After Kamishiro had been at the café for two weeks, the phone rang around noon one day, when the shop was crowded with customers.

Shin called because he was bored. No reason in particular, just the same old, same old.

Yuuki could hear loud voices in the background, probably Shin's co-workers. Every now and then, he heard the click of mah-jongg tiles.

"I'm on a break," Shin explained.

So you're not just twiddling your thumbs, Yuuki wanted to say, but he didn't feel like joking around today.

"Is it raining there? It's cloudy here, but doesn't feel like rain," Shin said.

The overcast skies Yuuki could see from the window probably reached across the mountains to Shin's work site, but the rain probably wouldn't make them stop working. Yuuki suddenly felt relieved that Shin was so far away. It was a selfish feeling that made him hate himself.

"Oh, here? Yeah, um, nothing special. Same as usual."

But something must have sounded different to Shin. "You catching a cold?" he asked. A chill shot down Yuuki's spine. He should have called Shin first and explained everything, but getting a call from him now had pretty much taken the wind out of his sails.

Every time he didn't bring up the subject, it became even harder to say. Yuuki was well aware of that, but his tongue felt heavy in his mouth.

"Sorry, I've got customers. Call you later."

Yet nobody cared if he took a personal call during business hours. Yuuki glanced at the counter and saw only friendly faces, nodding in his direction.

The middle-aged man sitting with his granddaughter could probably figure out who he was talking to and the nature of their relationship. With that in mind, Yuuki didn't feel inclined to talk like this in public.

"Well, see you," he said. A bland farewell. Yuuki dropped his cell phone in his apron pocket.

"Is everything okay?" the middle-aged man asked politely. He was Takai, Tsukada's old boss.

"Nothing that can't wait."

Yuuki apologized for keeping them waiting. Then he set out glasses of water and poured some orange juice for the little girl.

"What's with him?" asked Takai, pointing at Kamishiro.

"Well, ah, I just hired him."

Even when asked point-blank, there was no way Yuuki could explain why he'd hired Kamishiro on the spot.

Kamishiro wore the same chef's uniform that

had thrown Yuuki for a loop that morning, plus a pair of brand-new jeans. His head was covered with a bandana, and though he looked presentable, there was stubble on his chin.

"He gives off a weird vibe. Like an outcast or something," Takai muttered.

"An outcast?"

Takai almost hit the nail on the head, but still came up short somehow. When it came to cooks, "outcast" was not a word that Yuuki would use to describe Kamishiro, but there was nothing he could do about it now. He cast a glance into the kitchen. Yuuki had asked him not to look too fastidious.

At a café like this, where everybody knew everybody, Yuuki knew a big shot chef could intimidate the regulars. And even if he kept a low profile, Kamishiro's size alone would cause a stir.

"So where's he from?" Takai asked. "Forget it, I'll ask him myself."

Yuuki was too busy to stop him. Takai moved closer to the kitchen and interrogated the chef, and then ran back and shared the gossip like a schoolgirl.

"Wow. He started off at a hotel in Tokyo. He was there for five years! Then he got transferred to Sapporo six years ago."

Takai was obviously impressed.

"What are you saying? Cooks can get transferred?" another guy asked.

"A hotel chain opened a new branch. He's originally from Ebetsu, so they shipped him up here without even asking him."

"Shipped him up here? But nice to come back home, eh?"

Takai ran a outfitting store in the city for mountain climbers. Once a month he came to the café with his seven-year-old granddaughter. Yuuki wouldn't exactly call him a "regular."

Still, he was a customer with whom he shared deep roots, and the only other person besides Shin who knew about his past with Tsukada.

"Have you decided, Sayaka?" Takai asked the little girl.

"Yeah. What are you having, Grandpa?"

"Hmm. Maybe the sweet corn pasta carbonara."

"I can't even say that!" Sayaka giggled. "I'll have the chicken fried rice."

Takai didn't look old enough to even have a granddaughter. Though his hair had a few silver strands, his small frame and easygoing manner said otherwise. Just the other day, Takai had been whining about turning fifty. Yuuki still found it hard to believe.

Considering the youthful industry he was in, the face of an old geezer would send the customers fleeing. Takai had the relaxed tone of a well-seasoned man. All of his mountain climbing had served to make him look much younger than his years.

"Carbonara and chicken fried rice?" Yuuki repeated.

"Yes, but no hurry. I left Hirasaka-san in charge of the store."

Though Takai often mentioned him, Yuuki had never met Hirasaka. He had been hired to replace

Tsukada. While he was grateful that Takai had been careful not to force them to meet, Yuuki felt guilty that Hirasaka was always stuck minding the store.

Tsukada had once told him that his boss had an odd habit of disappearing at the most inconvenient times. Tsukada had often wondered if Takai was going where he claimed he was.

"Things have picked up since the last time I was here," Takai noted, surprised at the big crowd. Kamishiro started working there only two weeks ago, but his reputation had spread like wildfire.

The first week, Yuuki's old friends stopped by in droves, checking out the new guy. The next week they started to bring their friends.

Fuuka's customer base ballooned like a successful pyramid scheme, one telling two, two telling four. Kamishiro's talents more than lived up to the hype, and soon people were coming in from out of town.

"Thanks for waiting. Here's your avocado pizza."

The customer looked dubiously at the crust covered with deep green dip, topped with pepperoni and onion. He had expected only a few slices of avocado on top.

The dip, known as guacamole, was not familiar to most Japanese, but very popular in the U.S. and Mexico. Yuuki had learned that from Kamishiro.

"I started out at a French restaurant. After coming to Sapporo, I became a jack of all trades, cooking *katsudon* to pasta to shrimp chili. I even did the traditional New Year's soba. With only your own wits to fall back on, you can't help straying outside your field of expertise."

As Kamishiro patiently answered Takai's questions, the business about the menu came up. In fact, the items Kamishiro had added weren't limited to any one cuisine, but were guided by the expectations of a country town.

In particular, he kept to inexpensive ingredients. He chose not to stock up on exotic foodstuffs, preferring to use what he could find locally.

The customers who ate there were not adventurous. The emphasis was on familiar foods that wouldn't cause too much head-scratching. As per Yuuki's request, Kamishiro's menu additions were acceptable to the middle-aged residents and children that were typical of the region.

With his attention occupied by Takai, Yuuki found himself neglecting his maître d' duties. Since Kamishiro had started cooking, Yuuki had become the full-time floor manager. Once Yuuki had tasted Kamishiro's cooking, he had no desire to compete with him.

Though his grandparents did their best, Yuuki had never really learned about the finer culinary arts. He would never be in the same league as Kamishiro.

"All right. Here's your chicken fried rice."

"Is this…an egg?" the little girl gasped.

A white egg sat in the center of the colorful rice, boiled barely long enough to peel the shell. It jiggled as Yuuki set down the plate.

"You cut it open and then eat it," he explained.

"But it's wobbling," she whined.

Kamishiro handed her a fork, and Sayaka suddenly was all smiles. Though he kept quiet, he projected a tough, muscular persona which seemed to fascinate children. Sayaka's smile was proof of that.

"Itadakimasu!" she cried, poking the egg with the fork.

The soft yellow yolk exploded into the rice. She stirred it all up with a spoon and took a bite.

"It's wonderful!"

"You like it? That's great, Sayaka."

"Yeah."

"You're going to burst," her grandfather warned, poking her cheek, but Sayaka kept on smiling. That cheerful expression people get when eating good food was something to behold. The rest of the restaurant noise died away as Yuuki found himself entranced.

"Excuse me."

"Sorry. Sorry."

"Could I get a refill on this coffee?"

"Just a sec."

Though it was past two o'clock, the kitchen was running at full tilt. The original stove, a common home appliance, hadn't been able to keep up. A few days ago, they replaced it with a five-burner commercial model. It was the end of August, but the temperature still reached into the high eighties, and the café was feeling pretty stuffy. Soon they would have to replace the ancient air conditioner, too.

Since Kamishiro arrived, their expenses had gone up across the board, but Yuuki wasn't worried. Sales had gone up, too, plus Yuuki felt secure in knowing that someone would be with him from opening to closing.

"Kamishiro-san," a voice called out from the tables. "I'll have a pasta carbonara as well."

"Got it."

Kamishiro plucked out a strand of pasta to check its firmness. The aroma of fresh corn off the cob enticed the taste buds of other customers. Those who had just arrived were drawn to the same item.

Yuuki had worried that the kitchen might be too confining for tall Kamishiro, but by positioning himself in the middle, with the island pushed against the wall, he created an ideal workspace for himself. Everything he needed was just a step or two away. "Order for table three!"

"Table three."

Yuuki had never asked Kamishiro why he dragged his right foot. It didn't seem to affect his cooking, after all. The unique cadence of his footsteps couldn't be heard inside the café. None of the customers had noticed that there was anything different about him.

"Here we go. One sweet corn pasta carbonara."

"Mmm! Looks as delicious as usual."

Setting his newspaper on the counter, Takai took a deep whiff. The smell attracted Sakaya's attention.

"Smells good," she said, leaning forward.

"Want to try some?"

"I'm stuffed. Just a bit."

Her happy manner made Yuuki smile. Sayaka grabbed her grandfather's fork and took a big bite.

"That's 'just a bit,' huh?" Yuuki teased.

Suddenly he felt someone's gaze on the side of his face. Kamishiro had stopped working to look at them, but quickly averted his eyes and went back to stirring his pot.

"Excuse me. I'd like to order—"

"Yes. Sorry. I'll be right there!"

Yuuki grabbed his order pad from his pocket and hurried to the back tables. In a small restaurant like this, saving a few seconds hardly made a difference, but he quickened his steps anyway.

"So how should I address you as my employer? Sano-san? Boss? President?" Kamishiro asked one day. The tough-talking guy with attitude to spare actually had a nice side, too.

"President?" Yuuki laughed. "Don't worry about it."

"It's important to make the distinction," Kamishiro stubbornly insisted.

While Yuuki had no experience working in a large restaurant, seniority ruled the roost in places like that. Just imagining Kamishiro working in such a strict environment brought a smile to Yuuki's face.

"You don't have to use honorifics with me," Yuuki assured him. "Anyway, Kamishiro-san, you're five years older than me."

"Age is beside the point. You sign my paycheck. Respect must be paid."

Respect must be paid? What century was he living in?

In the end, they settled on a simple "Sano-kun," though Kamishiro had a hard time saying it.

"We don't have to," Yuuki said over and over, but Kamishiro stubbornly stuck to his guns. Sometimes he'd throw in a "Hey, you!" or "Yo!"

But he always meant well, and Yuuki tried hard not to laugh. Yuuki didn't care if he just called him by his last name, but Kamishiro never did.

Tsukada had always called him "Yuuki." Even now the sound of his voice lingered in Yuuki's ears. His heart pounded just wondering if Kamishiro would ever call him that.

Yet Yuuki doubted if that would ever happen, and laughed at his own foolishness. Just how long had he known Kamishiro? Yuuki couldn't expect to be on a first-name basis when they barely knew each other.

"Hey, you know something?" Kamishiro called out, gazing lazily out the window.

Yuuki looked over his shoulder and smiled at him.

"What?"

"About time we closed up."

"Yeah. Looks like it."

The hustle and bustle of the dinner crowd had died off over an hour ago. No more customers could be expected on a weeknight like this.

Hiding his smile so Kamishiro wouldn't see, Yuuki slid off the stool at the counter. To make sure no late customers would barge in, he hung out the "Closed" sign and locked the door.

"Want something to eat?" Kamishiro asked.

"I'm not that hungry. Noodles would be fine."

Although Yuuki had offered to cook after hours, the new master of the kitchen didn't care to share his territory. Yuuki never liked eating a heavy meal this late at night, and always chose something from their list of appetizers.

"We have some somen noodles. Boiled? Warmed? Cold?"

"Warmed is fine."

With respect to Yuuki's physical well being, these suppers had focused on Japanese dishes.

"A man can't live by noodles alone," Kamishiro-san told him.

Yuuki laughed and replied that a man's digestion went downhill only after age thirty. Even though he was past thirty, Tsukada had still craved deep-fried food. Yuuki had playfully warned him of the dangers of obesity, but Tsukada proved him wrong by dying first.

"We're out of mackerel. The only soup stock I have is bonito."

"That's okay."

Kamishiro had stocked the kitchen with Japanese ingredients, but Yuuki didn't want to be pampered. He knew that kind of thing could lead to misunderstandings. But despite Yuuki's protests to "keep it simple," Kamishiro turned the evening meal into a major operation.

"I'll tidy up in here," Yuuki said, starting to wipe down the tables.

The kitchen was Kamishiro's castle. Yuuki wondered if a stranger could tell who was the actual owner of Fuuka.

The doorknob rattled, and someone peered through the glass door.

"Hey!"

Yuuki glanced up and saw a familiar face.

"Shin?"

"Another customer?" Kamishiro asked from the kitchen.

"Ah, no."

At least a month had passed since their last meeting. Yuuki rubbed the back of his neck in dismay. How could he tell Shin about Kamishiro at this late date? He opened the door and forced a smile.

"Welcome back. You should have called and said you were coming."

"I just got back from the work site. I'm starving."

If things had been normal, Shin would have sat down at the counter. But Shin saw Kamishiro and stopped in the doorway.

"Who's that?"

"Ah, um, this is Kamishiro-san."

It was an awkward introduction. Yuuki grimaced at the sound of his own voice and stumbled over what to say.

"A friend?"

"Ah—"

Kamishiro came to the rescue. Despite having never seen Shin before, he flashed him an easygoing smile.

"You like somen?" he asked.

"What? Oh, sure—"

"Have a seat. It'll be done in a jiffy."

With his big hands, Kamishiro tossed some dried bonito into the boiling water. The savory aroma filled the café.

"Shin, sit down," Yuuki urged.

"Huh? Ah, well—"

"I'm just cleaning up."

They had had this same conversation many times before, with one big difference. Now Yuuki didn't ask Shin to go up his room and wait for him. And who was this guy cooking in the kitchen?

"Do you like chicken?" Kamishiro asked.

"Uh-huh," Shin said, nodding his head.

"And honeywort?"

"I like honeywort."

Shin would know that Kamishiro was older just from looking at him. But compared to Kamishiro's relaxed chatter, Shin's formal replies sounded rather cute.

"Sano-kun, here's yours."

"Thanks."

Kamishiro set two steaming bowls on the counter. Yuuki ducked into the kitchen to wash his hands, and then sat down next Shin.

"You said you were hungry. Let's eat."

"Oh, okay."

"Itadakimasu," Shin said quietly.

"Dig in," Kamishiro replied cheerfully.

As he slurped his noodles, Yuuki worried about how to bring up the subject of Kamishiro, but Shin saved him the trouble.

"Something's funny going on here," Shin said, pushing away his empty bowl. He lit a cigarette and smirked at Kamishiro.

"I seem to have walked into the wrong café," he added. "You think?"

Yuuki's heart skipped a beat.

"Really?" he answered innocently.

"Kamishiro-san, was it? Pleased to meet you. I'm Shin Suzutani. I went to high school with Sano."

"My name's Kamishiro. I've been working here since last month."

"Since last month?" Shin gasped. And Yuuki had never bothered to tell him? Yuuki pretended not to notice.

"This sure tastes good," Shin admitted. "So you changed the menu, huh? Is Japanese cuisine your specialty?"

"This actually isn't on the menu, but you're right, the menu has changed. You should stop by for lunch sometime."

"I'll do that. Next week, my work site is moving to a national highway project. What do you say, Sano?"

"Uh, right."

Now that the ice was broken, Shin had become himself again. He took a drag on his cigarette and continued chatting with Kamishiro.

"Sano used to make me dinner a couple of times a week. But nothing like this, I assure you."

"It's all the same to me. Making three servings is the same as making two."

"Good to hear. Saving on my meal budget helps me a lot. I usually wind up at fast food joints."

Shin used to eat dinner here and crash, but that was over a month ago. There was no going back to that life now. Yuuki quietly stirred his bowl with his chopsticks, unable to speak.

"The sesame oil too strong?" Kamishiro asked with concern.

"Eh? Ah, no. It's fine. A little hot—"

The stove had been turned off in the kitchen. It was almost midnight. Though it was cool outside, the temperature inside the café was perfect.

Yuuki looked up and met Kamishiro's steely gaze.

"If you're not feeling okay, go home. I'll finish straightening up."

"No, I'm okay. You should be hitting the sack, though."

"Don't give me that," Kamishiro grumbled, pointing toward the house with a wet hand. His cooking finally over for the day, Kamishiro went back to cleaning the kitchen.

"So you live here, too, Kamishiro-san?" Shin asked with surprise.

"Well, I actually sort of invited myself. When I heard that Yuuki had a spare room, I twisted his arm."

"You don't say."

There was a loud sound of water splashing in the sink, but Yuuki could hear Shin light another cigarette.

"Well, thanks for the meal. I'd better be on my way," Shin said, standing up. He stubbed out his cigarette in a slightly more vicious manner than Yuuki recalled seeing before.

"Shin, I—" Yuuki started to say.

"Life's looking up for you, eh?" Shin said heartily, grabbing Yuuki's shoulder.

Yuuki's body sank under the weight of Shin's arm. Yuuki sensed that Shin was using him as a crutch to prop up his tottering body.

"I'll come for lunch next time," Shin promised. "You sure have talent."

"Thanks."

"Well, take care, Kamishiro-san," Shin said, walking away.

During his entire visit, Yuuki had never looked directly at Shin, even when they were sitting right next to each other. Yuuki would have loved to make a joke about his behavior, but he lacked the confidence. He followed Shin to the front door, but had a hard time getting the words out.

"Shin, you can keep stopping by for dinner like this. Really. There's no reason for you to stay at arm's length."

"At arm's length? Don't worry, I'll keep bumming meals off you."

But not crashing at Yuuki's afterward also meant they wouldn't be drinking together. Shin playfully yanked on Yuuki's ponytail.

"You'd better get back there and help him. It's getting late."

"Yeah. Good night."

"G'night."

As Shin stumbled into the night, Yuuki had a sudden realization. Shin had finished his job across the mountains, and then drove straight to the café. No wonder he looked exhausted.

Now Yuuki felt even more guilty for not greeting him with a smile. Even if he didn't have anything to apologize for, his rudeness was inexcusable.

Suddenly he heard the sound of squealing tires outside.

"Sano-kun, are you finished with the floor?" Kamishiro asked.

"Yeah. I'm okay here."

"Let's lock up and turn off the lights."

With the lights off, Yuuki could clearly see his reflection in the window. He looked so pathetic right now. Did he look like that when Shin was here?

"How about I go run the bath water?" Yuuki offered.

"Sure," Kamishiro agreed, inspecting the saucepans.

Shin liked his hamburgers dripping with sauce, just like a little kid. That's what Yuuki would make for him next time.

But Shin didn't show up at Fuuka the next day, or the day after.

Chapter 4

The rain had been falling since morning, and business had been slow all day. After the last two regulars left at nine, Yuuki and Kamishiro decided to close early. They were discussing what to do with the leftovers when they heard the crunch of tires on gravel, followed by the slamming of a car door.

"Good evening!" Shin said, bursting into the café. The bell over the door shook wildly.

"Shin?"

"Yo!"

He was drunk as a skunk.

"Hey, look, Sano's here!" he said in a slurred voice.

"Hold on there, Shin."

"I had myself a drink or two, and now I need something solid to polish off the evening."

Hardly a drink or two. More like a drink or dozen. The stench of alcohol wafted from Shin like a cheap cologne.

"Hey, Kamishiro-san. Nice to see you again!" Shin yelled, giving a drunken salute that almost made him fall over.

Shin hadn't shown up here for days, and this was his second appearance? Thoroughly bewildered, Kamishiro quietly watched from behind the counter.

"Did you drive here, Shin?" Yuuki asked politely.

"Of course! How the hell would I get here?" Shin bellowed, turning his glazed eyes on Yuuki. Yuuki's mouth dropped open. Getting behind the wheel this sloshed was akin to committing suicide.

"Whoa, Shin, hold on there."

The energy went out of Shin's body like a marionette with its strings cut. If Kamishiro hadn't caught him from behind, both of them would have crashed to the floor.

"Hey, buddy boy! I think something's wrong with your leg there," Shin chortled.

"Shin!" Yuuki warned.

"That's a good man. I see, I see, I see. Got a bum leg, eh?"

Shin had drunk himself into a stupor, but some small part of his senses remained sharp.

"Shin, that's uncalled for," Yuuki said firmly.

"Sorry. Sorry."

Yuuki had never seen Shin so wasted, and had no idea what to do next.

"You're in no condition to eat right now. Let's get you to bed. C'mon, we'll find a place for you to crash."

"Sure that's okay with you? Don't wanna stick my oar in."

"Just stop mouthing off like an idiot."

Yuuki looked up at Kamishiro.

What do we do with him? he asked with his eyes.

Kamishiro said nothing.

"Kamishiro-san, I hate to impose, but could you help me get him inside?"

"Okay, but he's really drunk," Kamishiro frowned. He was acting like he'd never seen the like before.

Guess he's never worked in a bar, Yuuki thought.

"Sorry about this, Kamishiro-san, but can you grab his legs?"

"No, the other way around. I'll lift his top, you lift his bottom."

Kamishiro stretched out Shin's body on the café floor.

"I may have a bum leg, but I'm still stronger than you."

"Oh, sorry—"

Kamishiro leaned over Shin's head and began to lift him. The man under the influence slowly sat up with his eyes half-closed.

"No good, no good. Gotta get up early tomorrow. I'll eat and run."

"In that case, we'll call you a taxi."

"Can't go to work without my car."

All this hemming and hawing made Shin sound like a stubborn child. Yuuki looked at Kamishiro in confusion.

"Kamishiro-san, will you help me get him to the car?"

"Will you drive him home, then?"

"I can't think of a better plan."

Kamishiro's patient smile seemed to indicate that he was fed up with the whole situation.

"If he's so hell-bent on going home, he can get there on his own accord," he muttered, yanking Shin to his feet. "C'mon. One step ahead of the other."

"Hnnn—"

Putting an arm around his shoulders for support, Kamishiro walked Shin toward the door. Yuuki watched with dismay as Shin tottered unsteadily across the floor at a half-crouch. Kamishiro opened the door and let Shin outside.

"This is one big car," exclaimed Kamishiro.

The SUV was parked right in front of the café, but its high wheel base made it difficult to get Shin into the passenger seat.

"Heave ho!" Kamishiro said, tossing him into the back like a suitcase. Shin raised an awkward cry and toppled over. They arranged his legs on the seat like a pair of carry-ons.

"Considering his condition, what are the odds of him making it to work tomorrow?" Kamishiro asked.

"Hard to say."

Yuuki had never seen Shin with a hangover, but then he'd never seen him this drunk before, either.

"Once I get him home, he'll probably forget he was even here."

"Be careful when you close the door," Kamishiro said politely, though Shin was in another world.

Yuuki got into the driver's seat. The key was still in the ignition.

"Will you be okay?"

"Why?"

"Oh, nothing. You just might have a hard time hauling this guy up to his apartment," Kamishiro said quietly.

"I'll work it out," Yuuki laughed. "His apartment is on the first floor. I've just got to get him as far as the *genkon,* and then I can call a taxi. Can you grab me ten-thousand yen from the till?"

While Kamishiro returned to the café, Yuuki looked back at Shin and sighed. This was all his fault, so Yuuki couldn't feel too pissed at his drunk friend.

"Here you go," Kamishiro said, handing him the cash.

"Thanks."

Yuuki stuffed the bill into his jeans pocket. Kamishiro anxiously looked at Yuuki and the drunk behind him.

"Take care, then."

"Yeah."

Unlike Yuuki's subcompact, the steering wheel of Shin's SUV was the size of a tree trunk. And if that wasn't bad enough, Yuuki already felt worn out getting Shin into the car. He glared at Shin's reflection in the rearview mirror. His old high school friend was snoring with his mouth wide open. Yuuki grunted and headed for Shin's apartment, twenty minutes away.

"Your windshield wipers need replacing. Don't be such a bum and get it done," Yuuki muttered.

The early autumn rain snaked across the windshield, obscuring the view. Even though he knew that Shin was dead to the world, Yuuki still kept venting at him. Where the hell was his apartment, anyway? He'd only been there once or twice.

"Tastes so good, delicious," Shin was moaning.

"What are you going on about?"

He must still be dreaming about the café, Yuuki thought.

He would be sure to call him tomorrow, after he got sober. Shin owed an apology to Kamishiro. Yuuki wondered if he would even remember how disgracefully he'd behaved. Visualizing the scene, Yuuki started humming to himself.

"Huh?" Shin mumbled from the back.

"You awake?"

"What's going on, Sano?"

"Are you that drunk? Don't you remember?"

Shin looked out the window to see where he was, and then leaned forward to gape at Yuuki. His swollen eyes were only half-open, but his brain seemed to be working a little better.

"Your place is this way?" Yuuki asked.

"Turn left there. And then right after the next light."

"My chauffeuring services are not cheap, Shin."

By the time Yuuki pulled in front of Shin's building, he had finally gotten used to the steering wheel. He managed to squeeze the big car into a parking spot, and then turned off the engine.

"Can you walk from here?"

"Hard to say."

"Upsy daisy," Shin grunted, stumbling out of the car. He immediately collapsed on the wet sidewalk.

"For Pete's sake," Yuuki muttered, getting out of the car. He held the set of keys up to the street light.

"Shin, which is the key to your apartment?"

"The second-biggest one."

"Hold on, let me help you."

"Sorry."

Just like Kamishiro, Yuuki put his arm around Shin's shoulder to prop up his body. Though Kamishiro had pulled it off with a minimum of effort, lifting the Shin's dead weight made Yuuki grimace.

"Can't you move your legs on your own here?"

"No. They won't listen to a thing I say to them," Shin laughed. The upper half of his body was as rubbery as the lower half.

Yuuki unlocked the door and found the light switch. He turned it on and saw the cluttered studio and Shin's unkempt futon.

"You're futon is already laid out, so you can hit the sack."

"Yeah."

"Well, I've got to get going."

As things stood now, Shin should at least remember what to do now. Yuuki decided against pulling the practical joke he'd been mulling over, and found himself feeling a little disappointed. Shin stumbled forward.

"Careful now!" Yuuki gasped.

"Ouch! That hurt!" Shin cried out. He must have slammed his knees on the hardwood floor.

"Yeah, your legs are useless."

"My bad."

"You just can't go drinking yourself into this state."

As exasperated as he felt, Yuuki just couldn't abandon Shin, so he kicked off his shoes and stepped inside. He leaned over Shin's back and put his arms around his waist.

"You're too heavy! Can't you get up at all?"

"I'm trying, I'm trying," Shin protested, starting to giggle.

Every time he tried to stand, he fell flat on his face, but Yuuki wouldn't even try to carry him.

"Fine. Crawl there, then."

"I'm trying, I'm trying."

"Son of a bitch!" Yuuki snapped, veins popping out on his forehead. But then he started to giggle, too.

By the time Shin dragged his body to his unmade bed, Yuuki felt the awkward atmosphere between them had been cleanly swept away.

"You want some water?"

"Thanks."

Yuuki filled a cup left in the sink, then squatted down and handed it to Shin, who drained the cup with a couple of gulps. He looked like any ordinary drunk right now.

"Oh, by the way, can you catch a taxi around here?"

"If you don't call first, they won't come."

"I didn't bring my phone. Can you make the call?" Yuuki asked with a smile.

Just then he noticed that Shin's eyes, bleary with alcohol, were looking straight at him.

"Hey, spend the night. I'll drive you back tomorrow."

"You have to get to the work in the morning. Or did you forget?"

"I was kidding."

He was what? Yuuki's smile froze on his face. Shin was speaking somewhat lucidly for a man who was practically pickled in alcohol.

"I have to stock up on supplies tomorrow," Yuuki said.

"We'll leave early."

"I didn't tell Kamishiro-san that I'd be staying here. He—"

But before Yuuki could finish the sentence, Shin stood up and put his hand over Yuuki's mouth.

"Shin!" Yuuki cried out in a muffled voice. What was going on now? Even though Shin was not breathing right on him, he could still smell booze.

"Did you forget all about Tsukada-san?" Shin asked sadly, taking his hand away. But Yuuki found himself unable to answer.

"Shin," he muttered.

"You did forget! Have you told that guy about him? Funny how you didn't tell me."

"Shin!" Yuuki wailed.

Suddenly Shin leaned over and kissed Yuuki, who was too shocked to resist.

"S-Shin!"

Shin straddled his body, forcing him down. Yuuki's ponytail got caught in the fray, making him wince.

"Sano, Sano," Shin moaned over and over again, devouring Yuuki's mouth.

"No, no," Yuuki pleaded.

Shin sucked hard on Yuuki's lower lip, and then forced his tongue into his mouth. A wave of electricity ran down Yuuki's spine as his face twisted with shock. This wasn't supposed to happen. This idiotic behavior should be stopped, no questions asked.

But the pleasure only intensified. Yuuki's body began to expand from the inside out. Like a starving man, Shin sought out the tender flesh inside Yuuki's mouth. Yuuki's heart raced so hard he thought it might rupture, pressing against his ribcage.

As Shin grabbed his ass and kneaded his buttocks, Yuuki's hips began to sway. He was definitely starved for it, too. He hadn't been with another man for so long, sex was only a distant memory. But that still didn't mean he would give in.

"No, Shin. We can't," Yuuki protested, wrenching his mouth away with great effort.

But Shin just moved to Yuuki's neck, his wet lips trailing across his skin. Yuuki felt a sensation like pins and needles in the soft place inside his thighs.

He wanted it. He truly wanted it. But logic and passion warred inside him. He arched his back and gazed at a ceiling lamp, but the light looked blurred and distorted. His reason was as confused as his clouded vision.

Begging and pleading would make no difference. Even if he could resist Shin, his body still burned, and Shin had definitely noticed. He pulled down Yuuki's shirt and nibbled at his collarbone.

"Ow!" Yuuki gasped, shrinking from the pain.

Shin dived his hand under Yuuki's shirt and massaged his chest.

"Shin!" Yuuki shrieked. But Shin just slapped his face. Yuuki couldn't believe that Shin would raise his hand against him.

Contrary to his rough-hewn exterior, Shin was never violent. Sometimes he'd blow off steam after work, but he'd never actually punched anybody. Back in high school, Shin would often take the blame when his friends messed up the AV room, even when it wasn't his fault.

More than the shock of being struck, Yuuki was even more devastated that Shin had been repressing so much anger against him.

"S-Shin. No…"

He thought that his kind-hearted friend might be bowing his head in apology, blaming alcohol for his lack of control. But what oozed from Shin's clenched teeth was bitterness.

"I always wanted to do this," he said. "But I thought it was a lost cause. "Every time I pretended to be asleep and you came over to touch me, my heart beat like crazy. I should have made a move, but I wanted to wait until you got over Tsukada-san. But you never said anything."

"Shin, I know…"

"Then why? What's with that bastard Kamishiro?"

Yuuki looked at Shin with surprise. Were his eyes just bloodshot, or was he crying?

"You been sleeping with him?"

"No, I haven't."

"Don't lie. Why didn't you tell me about him then?"

Even when he was drunk, Shin definitely knew how to push his buttons.

"Prove it. Prove you never slept with him," Shin muttered. His left arm wrapped around Yuuki's waist.

How am I supposed to do that? Yuuki wondered.

Shin pulled him closer.

"Sano, Sano," Shin said softly, calling out his name. Yuuki's heart felt like it was breaking as Shin's hands stroked his body.

"Ahh…" he moaned, feeling a tongue sliding across his bare chest. His jaw trembled slightly, but Yuuki stopped himself from gasping aloud. Maybe he could just forget that this was Shin. Then it would be okay. But Yuuki couldn't forget. Those hands, that voice, couldn't belong to anyone but his old friend.

"That hurts," Yuuki grimaced as Shin gnawed on his nipple.

Shin's hands moved lower. Suddenly he bent down and put his mouth around Yuuki's penis.

Yuuki's toes curled as they always did when he felt turned on. Those memories were still with him. Staring blankly at the ceiling, he crawled back through the memories of the past. But though Shin was sucking frantically, Yuuki's member didn't respond.

"Shit!" Shin snapped, roughly pulling Yuuki's legs apart.

Yuuki was too tired to resist. Lifting Yuuki's

saliva-drenched testicles, Shin wiggled his thick finger into his hole, then ferociously moved it in and out.

"Hah!" Yuuki gasped in pain. He ground his teeth together, stifling a cry, then shut his eyes and turned his face away. He didn't want to look at Shin, not when he was scouring the inner parts of his soul.

The rude movements of Shin's fingertips made Yuuki wince, but he tried to block out the pain. The strain chilled his feet and hands as he panted through clenched teeth. Shin's finger kept on ripping inside him.

"No good…" Yuuki moaned.

"Eh?"

Something suddenly brushed against his stomach. Yuuki cautiously opened his eyes to find Shin holding him around his waist, his head slumped. No matter how comical the scene may have looked to the casual observer, no one was laughing.

"What's the point if you're going to be like this?" Shin said tiredly.

Yuuki had nothing to say back to him.

"Go home," Shin said in a small voice. He sat on the futon, clasping his knees to his chest. Yuuki didn't respond, and headed for the door.

The streets were empty at this hour. Yuuki trudged along, the rain soaking him to the skin. He finally arrived at a main thoroughfare and saw the flash of headlights, but the first two taxis sped past him.

"They probably add an extra charge for messing up their upholstery," Yuuki muttered. "Shin owes me for this."

The odds of that happening were pretty low, yet Yuuki kept on muttering to himself as he walked along. He finally managed to convince a suspicious driver to give him a lift, and made it home a hour later.

"Sorry for all the trouble," he apologized to the driver. He went inside and took ten thousand from the cash register, then came out and tipped the man another twenty. He hoped that would be enough to clean his car seats. Yuuki wasn't in the mood to get into a fight.

Kamishiro would have hit the sack hours ago. Trying to make as little noise as possible, Yuuki headed for the bathroom.

If Kamishiro woke up, Yuuki didn't know how to explain why he looked like a drowned rat. He wanted to wash away any evidence of being with Shin.

His wet clothes clung stubbornly to his body. He bit his lip, growing more irritated by the minute. Suddenly the memory of Shin's kiss came back to him and his skin quivered.

"Damn!"

As he yanked his T-shirt over his head, the cloth brushed against his neck. He was too scared to look in the mirror right now. Who knows what he'd find? The fabric brushing against his raw nipples made him break out in goosebumps. Hot water would only make it worse. The thought alone made his hand tremble on the shower faucet.

"Ow!"

Yuuki timidly touched his nipples with just his fingertips. They were hot and swollen and stained with blood. He gritted his teeth and cleansed the throbbing wounds. Just then he heard the door open behind him, and Yuuki jumped with surprise.

"You're back!"

"Kamishiro-san."

Kamishiro stood in the bathroom doorway wearing only sweatpants. Yuuki should have known Kamishiro would wait up for him. He had probably been worrying about him all night.

Yuuki felt touched by Kamishiro's concern, but also mortified. How long had he been standing there? Did Kamishiro hear him moan when he touched his sore nipples? Yuuki's cheeks blushed scarlet.

"What's that?"

"Umm…"

"There."

Yuuki thought he must be wondering why he was fondling his own chest, but Kamishiro was looking at Yuuki's throat.

"Hey!" Kamishiro said suddenly, stepping into the bathroom. Yuuki shrank back, but he had no place to hide.

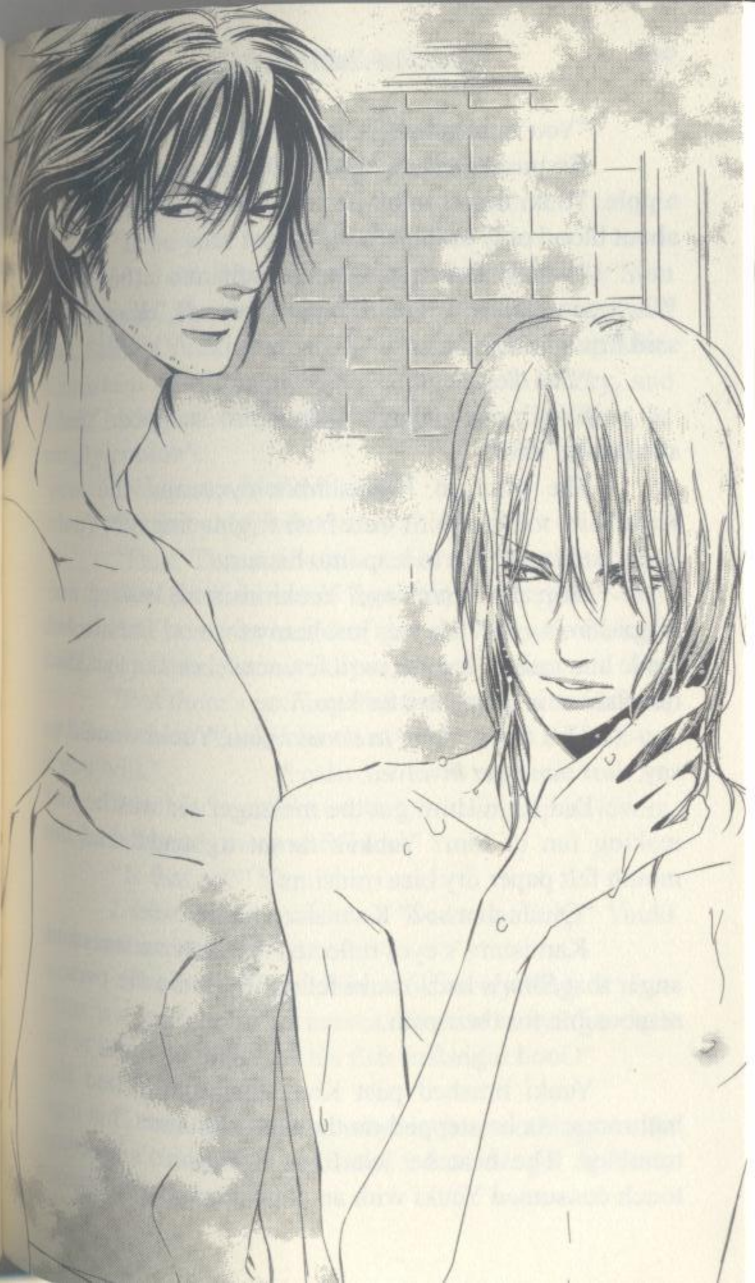
"What is this? Was it him?"

"It's…nothing."

For such a big guy, Kamishiro moved with remarkable dexterity. Yuuki shivered as Kamishiro touched the back of his neck.

"Is this a hickey?" Kamishiro asked, sounding confused.

His fingers gently stroked the surrounding area. A sensual heat began to bloom in Yuuki's body, and not just because he was feeling stressed-out.



"You're bleeding!" Kamishiro gasped.

He pushed away Yuuki's hand and touched his nipple. Yuuki didn't think he was that hurt, but hearing about blood only amplified the pain.

"You're freezing. Get yourself into a hot bath. When you get out, I'll tend to your wounds," Kamishiro said firmly.

"I'm okay."

"You're not okay!" Kamishiro snapped. Yuuki swallowed hard.

The glint in Kamishiro's eyes and the way Kamishiro touched him were both frightening, yet Yuuki had a sudden desire to leap into his arms.

"It really is nothing," Yuuki insisted, looking into Kamishiro's eyes. "He was just horny for sex. The alcohol made him mean. He gave me a few scratches, but that kind of behavior is pretty rare for him."

This has nothing to do with you, Yuuki wanted to say. *Just don't get involved, okay?*

Did Kamishiro get the message? Or was he just making fun of him? Yuuki's throat tightened and his mouth felt paper dry.

"Oh. Is that so?" Kamishiro finally said.

Kamishiro's eyes reflected the same sadness and anger that Shin's had. Yuuki felt guilty to be the person responsible for their pain.

"Good night."

Yuuki brushed past Kamishiro and exited the bathroom. As he stepped on the white bathmat, his legs trembled. The heat he felt from Kamishiro's fleeting touch consumed Yuuki with an almost insatiable desire.

He steeled himself not to turn around.

"Sano-kun," Kamishiro muttered.

"What?"

"Is he your lover?"

If he denied it, Kamishiro would think that Shin beat him up. The marks on his body certainly suggested that. Still, if Yuuki said yes, he would be betraying Shin. Kamishiro didn't know their complicated history, and Yuuki had no desire to share it with him. Or rather, he simply couldn't.

"No, just a friend."

"In that case, what's this all about?"

"This? This is about sex, not affection."

Was Kamishiro-san that much of a goody-two-shoes? Had he never heard of gay sex? Maybe doing it with a guy had never actually occurred to him.

"But there's nothing like that going on with him, so it's all fine," Yuuki went on. "Just call it a break-up, if you will."

But they certainly weren't breaking up as lovers, and probably not even as friends.

"Is that so?" Kamishiro said.

Don't be so damned understanding! Yuuki screamed inside.

The way Kamishiro took everything at face value was getting on his nerves. Yuuki was dying to lash out at him, but clenched his fists instead.

"If you say so."

"I say so. That's why it has nothing to do with you. I'm off to bed now. I have to get up early tomorrow."

"Well, good night, then."

"Good night," Yuuki answered, without turning around. He had no willpower left to resist Kamishiro's gaze.

Chapter 5

"I'm hiking Asahidake again," Tsukada bragged.

"Again?" Takai asked, looking surprised.

"A group from Sapporo needs an experienced climber to go with them."

Tsukada had been a mountain climbing fanatic since college. But Takai thought Tsukada had gotten a bit too cocky after his second ascent of Asahidake.

Yuuki sighed. When it came to the mountains, Tsukada abandoned him without a second thought, or so Yuuki believed.

"It will only be for a couple of days," Tsukada assured him.

But that "couple of days" had stretched into an eternity.

"When are you leaving?" Yuuki had asked him.

"The second of next month. Golden Week is the only time people can get off from work."

Spring came late to the northern latitudes of Hokkaido, but by May the cherry blossoms would be blooming. The temperature would climb and the winter snowpack that covered the paths would have melted by then.

But last year was different. According to Takai, it was still "winter on the peaks," even in May. Though the mountain was only a modest seventy-five hundred feet in elevation, it shared the same weather conditions as a ten thousand foot peak further south.

"Hey, after you get back, let's take a few days off and go somewhere," Yuuki had suggested. But Tsukada shook his head.

"I can't. I'm already taking my days off for this hike."

"You mean you're not doing it for the store?"

"It's a freelance job. My old boss asked me to do a favor for some friends of his."

Tsukada also participated in expeditions for the regulars at Takai's store, and usually took off a few days before and after. Yuuki's face fell.

"Sorry," Tsukada said softly, but apologies didn't help.

Yuuki sullenly turned his back. Tsukada grabbed his shoulders and pulled him close.

Later, lying in bed together, Yuuki pouted like a spoiled child, while Tsukada covered him with kisses. Minutes later, all was forgiven.

"Come climbing with me!" Tsukada suggested.

"Perish the thought," Yuuki scoffed.

"Really? It's a lot of fun."

"More fun than this?" Yuuki teased, thrusting his hips.

In retaliation, Tsukada quickly penetrated Yuuki's hole with his finger. A torrent of sensation flooded Yuuki with a burning hot intensity.

"No…ahhh…please…" he moaned.

"Should I stop?"

"I didn't say that."

After his grandparents moved away, the house had seemed very small and lonely. Tsukada slept over several times a week, but when Yuuki asked him to move in, Tsukada laughed.

"If I did that, you'd be a wreck."

"We could do it every night if we were together."

"Oh! In that case, count me in!"

"You big dummy."

Yuuki wanted to fall asleep in Tsukada's embrace, even if they did wind up doing it every night. Even if he did wind up breaking into little pieces. Yuuki's body still possessed the memory of being held in those strong arms.

"Hey! Wanna bet how many times you can come?" Yuuki proposed.

"You? Or me?" Tsukada asked with a smile.

"Tsukada-san, of course."

"Idiot. Not a fair challenge for a thirty-something man."

"But this hardly seems like the body of a thirty-something man."

Diving his hand under the covers, Yuuki took hold of Tsukada's swelling erection. Tsukada grimaced and steeled his nerves. He was too cute for words.

So their last conversation was about how many times they could come. Yuuki's dreams always turned into nightmares filled with deep regret.

"Tsukada-kun was buried under an avalanche!"

Takai's call came as Yuuki was closing for the night. A chill raced down his spine, a sensation he still remembered. He peered out into the dark and felt nothing but despair. The rescue team couldn't even start up the mountain until morning. Tsukada would have to spend the night under the snow.

"Takai-san, you must be mistaken!"

"There was an avalanche near Kinko Rock. The rest of the expedition returned just before noon. But Tsukada-kun…"

"This can't be true," Yuuki said over and over again. "This can't be true." He couldn't think of anything else to say. The last few customers noticed that Yuuki was acting strangely. They called out to him, but he didn't reply.

Yuuki thought about what he had being doing at noon that day. Smiling at his customers. Cooking them food. Playing straight-man to their jokes. While Tsukada was being buried by an avalanche, Yuuki was his usual happy-go-lucky self. Suddenly he felt ashamed.

"It's a lie!" he cried out.

Why didn't they tell him earlier? He kept screaming at Takai, who didn't deserve it. The phone fell from Yuuki's hands, crashing loudly into the cash register.

The harsh sound yanked Yuuki out of his nightmare.

"A lie."

Over and over his lips formed the word from his nightmare. He stared up at the ceiling. Finally the

nightmare went away and he could relax.

"Tsukada-san…"

In his dreams, in this bed, Tsukada had held him in his arms. Now that he was alone, Yuuki didn't know what to do with himself.

"Ah…"

The fires that burned in his dreams still glowed within him. He could hardly stand even thinking about Tsukada. Recalling his gentle caresses, Yuuki's hand dove under the sheets and found his own body instead.

"Hmm…"

As his hand crept under his pajama top, Yuuki remembered Tsukada's laughing face whenever he played with his breasts.

"Feels like a super triple-A cup," Tsukada teased. The stimulation coursed through Yuuki's groin, filling his penis with desire.

"You like this, eh?" Tsukada whispered.

"Hmm…"

When Tsukada touched his nipples, Yuuki would turn his back to him. They would cuddle like two spoons in a drawer, and Kamishiro always whispered in his ear.

"Now don't run away from me."

"Tsukada-san!"

Touching himself only left Yuuki feeling miserable, but he still continued. Now he was stroking his thighs. His wrist brushed against the tip of his erection, making his body shudder.

"Ahh…" he moaned, though the sensation was not all that satisfying. Suddenly Yuuki called out for his lost lover.

"Tsukada-san…touch me there…"

"Here?" Tsukada would ask.

"No, there…"

Remembering Tsukada's touch, Yuuki's grabbed his own cock. The only time Tsukada's big hands moved with grace was when he was stroking Yuuki's penis.

"How can…you do that…"

"I know all the places that make you feel good."

Yuuki worked the tip of his rod with his thumb, as his hips thrust forward uncontrollably.

"Ahh…ahh…ahh…"

"You're coming, Yuuki. You're coming…"

Now Yuuki could almost believe that Tsukada was whispering in his ear. He responded to that voice, and got lost in his own fantasy world.

He remembered how Tsukada's body had covered him like a warm blanket. How his arms rippled with muscle. How his skin glistened with water when he was in the shower.

"Ahh…"

All of a sudden, the fantasy changed. The image of Tsukada's naked body turned into Kamishiro's naked body.

You like looking at naked men?

That's right, Yuuki confessed in his fantasy. *I purred when I saw you.*

As Yuuki visualized Kamishiro penetrating him, his body throbbed.

Suddenly, it was all over. Yuuki closed his eyes and laughed at himself. What an idiot he was. No matter how long he had abstained from sex, he wasn't about to

sleep with a guy he'd just met.

But he still could dream, couldn't he?

"Hah…hah…hah…"

Yuuki could feel his heart beat, and pinched the erect buds on his chest. His whole body trembled as semen spurted inside his shorts.

"Ahhhhhhhhh…"

His lips parted in a faint smile for a moment, but then he firmly pressed them together and closed his eyes with shame.

"I'm back," Yuuki said, hauling in groceries. Every day he went to the local supermarket for supplies, but wasn't about to disclose this to his curious customers. Usually he transferred his purchases to a plain cardboard box. He wanted them to think their ingredients came from some exotic source.

But today Yuuki wasn't in the mood to keep up appearances. He lugged in bags with the store logo right on them.

"Hey, about time," Takai said. He was sitting at the counter.

"Welcome," Yuuki said, but he had a funny feeling that something was up.

Business usually dropped off around two o'clock, after the lunch rush. Later, high school students often dropped by for a snack on their way home. Kamishiro had sent Yuuki to the store while they had a breather.

"Don't we have enough to last us until tomorrow morning?" Yuuki had protested, followed by a heavy sigh. Kamishiro had rolled his eyes.

"Enough with the sighing. You're giving everybody the blues."

Ever since that night at Shin's apartment, Yuuki had been sighing throughout the day. He constantly worried that Kamishiro-san hadn't believed the excuse that Shin had hurt him in a drunken fit.

"While you're at it, get something for us tonight," Kamishiro directed.

"Like what?"

"I'd say something you'd like to eat, but you'll just tell me you're not hungry again," Kamishiro muttered. "How about gazpacho? Cold soup always goes down easy, even when you don't have an appetite."

"Gazpacho, huh?"

"Just buy whatever you like," Kamishiro said soothingly, like a parent patting a child for being a good boy.

Whatever, Yuuki thought. It was true, he didn't have much appetite lately. But he was really starting to hate how Kamishiro kept looking at him with sympathy.

"Well, I'm off," Yuuki said.

"See you."

He drove to the neighborhood supermarket. Except for the fresh produce he got at the morning farmer's market, everything else they needed was available nearby.

Yuuki looked at Kamishiro's messy, dashed-off shopping list. It looked like something you would give to a little kid to keep him occupied. Was the chef just giving him something to do? And why did Kamishiro keep worrying about him? It wasn't like Yuuki was acting that strange or anything.

'Sudachi, red wine vinegar, condensed milk…" he muttered to himself.

Truth be told, Yuuki had been pretty spaced out since that fateful night at Shin's. Just that morning, he accidentally dropped three plates while doing the dishes. No wonder Kamishiro was concerned.

A small part of Yuuki actually wanted to kick up a fuss, but a louder voice in his head told him to just let it go. He peered up through the windshield at the overcast sky. Even if he didn't feel like it, he would put on a happy face when he got back to the café.

"Looks like rain," Yuuki said innocently.

Kamishiro only smiled. Something told Yuuki that they had just been talking about him. Maybe Kamishiro had brought up the stuff about Shin. In turn, Takai had probably filled in the chef about Yuuki and Tsukada's relationship.

"Out shopping, huh?" Takai asked casually.

"Yeah, some things got broken," Kamishiro said, words that filled Yuuki's heart with more poison.

"Here for lunch, Takai-san?"

"Nah, just a break. Some coffee might hit the spot, though."

Takai rarely stopped by in the afternoon without his granddaughter in tow. Had Kamishiro actually asked him to come over? Yuuki's imagination was now running completely wild.

"Shall I make a pot?" Kamishiro offered.

"I should really be going," Takai sighed. "Can I have a cup to go?"

Fuuka wasn't known as a specialty coffeehouse, but their house roast wasn't half bad. His grandfather, who never cooked himself, insisted that Yuuki should keep serving good coffee after he inherited the café.

Yuuki forced himself to smile at Takai as he went out the door. Now that the place was empty, he could let loose with both barrels.

"What did Takai-san want to see you about?" Yuuki asked pointedly.

"Nothing. He was in the neighborhood and happened to drop by."

"Oh, really?"

He and Kamishiro stuck to their lies, their mild expressions frozen on their faces. Having nothing more to say, Yuuki turned his back and grimaced. He had felt a chill as soon as he walked in, and not because of the air conditioning.

Kamishiro peered into the grocery bags and dug out the condensed milk. Yuuki had wondered why he wanted it, but didn't bother to ask.

"So, what do you want to eat today?" Kamishiro asked in a motherly tone. Every time he asked that question, Yuuki's nerves grew even more frayed.

So Kamishiro had sent Yuuki away for his own good, and then went on a fishing expedition in

his absence. The more Yuuki questioned Kamishiro's ulterior motives, the more anxious and frustrated he became.

"Things look dead right now. I'll go rest in back for a while," Yuuki said.

He tried to act nonchalant, but felt a little guilty for leaving Kamishiro to fend for himself.

"You do look a little green around the gills. Go lie down," the chef said.

What a pushover Kamishiro was. A real softy. He never teased Yuuki for being such a worrywart. Yuuki sidled up next to the him and took the sudachi out of the bag.

I should have found some riper ones, he thought, rolling the small green fruit in his hand.

Kamishiro held up the condensed milk, his eyes sparkling like a child's.

"I have big plans for this," he said happily. A new menu item had probably just occurred to him, but Yuuki didn't feel like asking about it. Something else was on his mind.

"If I ask you something, will you give me an honest answer?" he said bluntly.

"What?"

"What you were talking to Takai-san about?"

Kamishiro suddenly looked bewildered. Yuuki took the can of milk from his hand and set it near the sudachi.

"Were you gossiping about Shin?" Yuuki persisted.

"No, nothing like that," Kamishiro said sincerely.

"Oh, I see. Then you must have been talking about Tsukada, and what a pathetic creature I turned into after he died."

For some reason, Kamishiro smiled. A sudden blush warmed Yuuki's cold cheeks, and he found himself unable to hold back his fury.

"That's why I don't care if Shin wants to sleep with me. It's fine if you want to sleep with me, too, but you probably don't do it with guys."

"Sano-kun, cut it out!" Kamishiro said firmly, though his eyes still looked sad. *Don't be so down on yourself,* they seemed to be saying.

Yuuki couldn't stand it. He wanted to be desired, not pitied. And stop calling him Sano-kun! No matter how much sympathy Kamishiro showed him, Yuuki still felt upset by it.

"If you think I'm so pathetic, then just sleep with me already!" Yuuki snapped, looking Kamishiro right in the eyes.

Kamishiro's dark eyes steadily glared back at him, without a flicker of hesitation. Yuuki felt that if he looked away, or even blinked an eyelash, the tense atmosphere in the room would shatter into a million tiny pieces.

As several painful seconds ticked by, neither of them moved. Finally Kamishiro broke the tension.

"Fine, then. C'mon," he snapped, grabbing Yuuki's wrist. With his other hand, Kamishiro calmly turned off the stove. But who was the real Kamishiro? How could the fine line between anger and compassion be bridged so abruptly?

Kamishiro roughly dragged Yuuki out of the café and all but tossed him toward the back door.

"K-Kamishiro-san," Yuuki stuttered nervously.

"You asked me to sleep with you. So let's do it."

"W-wait a minute. You can't seriously—"

"Time's a wasting," Kamishiro said. He limped to the front door and turned the lock.

He is one cool customer, Yuuki thought.

Kamishiro glanced back over his shoulder, tears welling up in his eyes. Yuuki had been trying just to make him angry, but now Kamishiro's face was contorted with real pain. Yuuki felt a sharp twinge in his heart.

"C'mon," Kamishiro repeated.

"K-Kamishiro-san!"

"Shut up and hurry. You're the one who suggested we hit the sack."

Soon they were in Yuuki's bedroom. The unmade bed still bore collateral damage from last night's jacking off, but Yuuki had no time to feel embarrassed.

"Hey, owwww!" he cried, as Kamishiro carelessly tossed him on the bed.

"Just to let you know, I have absolutely no experience with this, so don't complain if I leave a few bruises," Kamishiro barked.

Leave a few bruises?

Yuuki shivered all over. He'd never had rough sex before. From the very beginning, Tsukada had treated Yuuki with nothing but tenderness.

"Hurry and undress," Kamishiro ordered.

"No way!" Yuuki protested, but Kamishiro grabbed his collar. Yuuki instantly put up his fists.

"Cut it out!" he cried, raking his nails across Kamishiro's cheek.

But that didn't slow him down in the least. Kamishiro easily pinned both of Yuuki's arms behind his back.

"You idiot," he muttered darkly.

All of a sudden, everything changed. Kamishiro let go of Yuuki's wrist and gave him a gentle look.

"Kamishiro-san?" Yuuki whispered.

What had happened? Did the chef suddenly realize how scared Yuuki was? Or did Yuuki just not turn him on? Then again, maybe Kamishiro thought the bad cop routine would make Yuuki instantly surrender.

Suddenly Yuuki turned pale.

"What are you doing?" he gasped.

"Taking my clothes off. You should, too," Kamishiro said, giving him a steely look.

Now Yuuki felt relieved for some reason, but his hands still trembled as he slowly unbuttoned his shirt.

"If it's just intercourse, you can do it the same way with a man," Yuuki explained, undoing his ponytail. "You don't need to hold back. Close your eyes if you want."

He swept his damp hair away from his face and looked carefully at Kamishiro.

"But there is one other thing," Yuuki said tentatively.

"And that is?"

"I don't suppose you can kiss me?"

"Oh, Sano-kun," Kamishiro sighed.

"What? Does kissing a guy gross you out?" Yuuki challenged, daring Kamishiro to do it. He was definitely dying for him to try.

Yuuki was well aware of his own hidden perversions, and knew that Kamishiro had sensed them, too. To keep Kamishiro in the game, Yuuki quickly locked eyes with him.

"C'mon, give it the old college try. Kiss me," Yuuki urged.

He knew it was a shameless come-on, but he didn't really care. In any case, he'd already dragged himself through the mud. Why shouldn't he ask for the whole nine yards? Yuuki waited for Kamishiro to take him up on the offer. And waited some more. He was about to throw in the towel, when Kamishiro finally made his move.

"Huh?" Yuuki gasped, as Kamishiro wrapped his arms around him. With enough force that it was almost painful, Kamishiro firmly grabbed Yuuki's chin and kissed him.

An intense, insatiable, unrelenting kiss. Yuuki gasped for air, his chest heaving. Saliva dribbled from the corners of his lips, mingling with his tears.

"Ahh…ahh…enough…" Yuuki moaned.

Just then Kamishiro's hot tongue plunged into his mouth. Yuuki shuddered all over with pleasure. He was shaking so hard he couldn't even undo the rest of his buttons, and just grabbed at his shirt instead.

"Uhhnn…" Yuuki groaned, as Kamishiro's tongue brushed the roof of his mouth. His saliva tasted like some rich dessert. As their tongues twined together, Kamishiro's rough lips gently nibbled Yuuki's soft ones.

Yuuki's face had already been transformed into a living thing of exquisite sensitivity.

Again and again, Yuuki stuck out his tongue and licked Kamishiro's unshaved face. Suddenly Kamishiro's tongue glided down Yuuki's jaw to the hollow of his throat, then moved further south. Not bothering to undo the buttons, Kamishiro ripped off Yuuki's shirt.

"Ahh!" Yuuki gasped again. Though they had only kissed each other so far, he was overcome by a wave of pleasure that he usually felt right before he climaxed.

The wounds left by Shin had already healed by now. Kamishiro looked at his nipples.

"Which one?" he whispered, but he didn't wait for an answer. He attached his mouth to Yuuki's right nipple and sucked it with all his might.

"Uhnnn!" Yuuki moaned again.

As could be expected of a man who claimed to be straight, Kamishiro suckled at Yuuki's nipple like it belonged to a woman. But he missed having a soft female breast that he could cup in the palm of his hand. Yuuki's chest was flat as a board.

Kamishiro probably didn't have a lover, though at his age, he might have a wife and child stashed away somewhere. Yuuki wondered about the past that Kamishiro didn't mention on his résumé. He must have someone he yearned for in the way that Yuuki had yearned for Tsukada.

"Hah!" Yuuki cried out, as Kamishiro's tongue swirled around his nipple. The penis that had stayed limp with Shin began to throb inside his boxers.

"Please. Take off my clothes," Yuuki pleaded.

At this rate, Kamishiro's tongue alone would make him come. Gripped by an overpowering sensation, Yuuki shuddered as Kamishiro sucked his nipple over and over.

All of a sudden, Yuuki's hips heaved upwards as he ejaculated.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhh…"

Unbelievable! Kamishiro hadn't even touched his penis! The warm liquid soaked through his underwear.

Sensing that something had happened, Kamishiro shoved his hands into Yuuki's jeans. As Kamishiro fumbled through the semen-soaked pubic hair, Yuuki's spent cock came to life again.

"You're so out of control," Yuuki gasped, his face flushed crimson. "Let's take your clothes off, too."

He kissed Kamishiro and quickly unzipped his jeans. Yuuki's heart thrummed at the sight of Kamishiro's stiff penis. At the same time, Kamishiro impatiently pulled down Yuuki's soaking-wet boxers.

Kamishiro seemed to be smiling as his penis grew even more erect. But was he smiling with joy, or self-derision? At this point, Yuuki didn't really care. The only thing on his mind was satisfying the ferocious desire that filled his lonely body.

"Is it okay to go in, even if you're not loosened up?" Kamishiro asked.

For someone who had supposedly never slept with a guy, Kamishiro seemed to know a lot about gay sex.

"It's okay," Yuuki whispered.

The last time Yuuki had had sex was more than a year ago. All the tension stored up in his body was ready to burst. He didn't want gentleness. He wanted it rough enough to get him through the pain of losing Tsukada. He wanted Kamishiro to drive his hard erection into him and make the world go away.

But Kamishiro just inserted a finger into Yuuki's hole.

"That's good," Yuuki moaned, wrapping his legs around Kamishiro's waist. He grabbed Kamishiro's cock and started to play with it.

"Wait," Kamishiro whispered. "Not yet."

Now Yuuki looked like a dog begging for a treat. Kamishiro added another finger to the one inside and kept kissing him.

"Ahhhh…" Yuuki shuddered, gasping for air. Right now, he didn't even care if couldn't breathe. Kamishiro quickly put a pillow under Yuuki's hips, making him feel like he was floating off the bed.

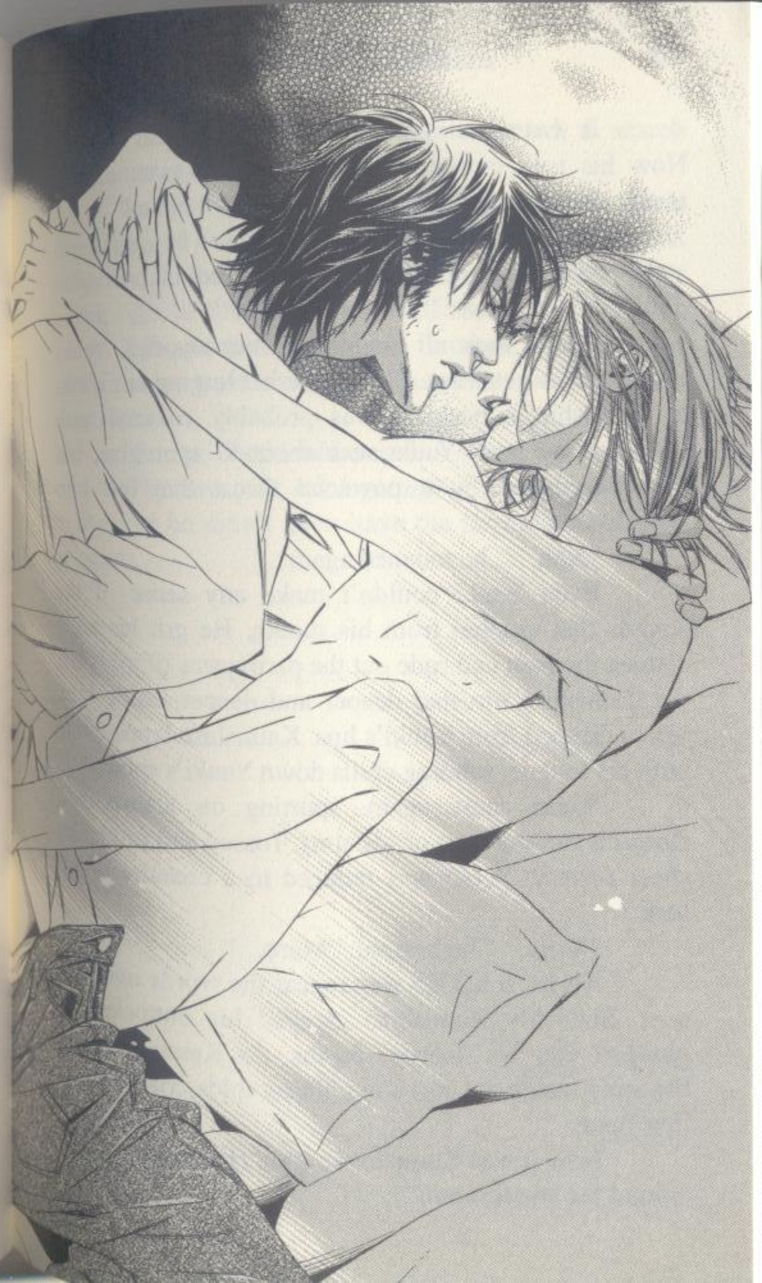
"I'm entering you."

Yuuki just nodded.

Kamishiro's hot, hard penis slowly entered Yuuki's hole.

"Ahh…ahh…ahhhhh…" Yuuki panted, instinctively jerking his head backward. After such a long wait, his flesh tingled with electricity.

On the verge of crying out in pain, Yuuki bit down on his lip, hard enough to draw blood. The tip of Kamishiro's engorged cock pressed into the narrow opening, expanding it to its limits. Yuuki's legs lost their grip around Kamishiro's waist and floated into the air.



It was a comical sight, but Yuuki didn't laugh. Now his toes curled as Kamishiro slid even deeper inside him, then pulled back a little.

"Too hard?"

"I-I'm okay," Yuuki whispered in a voice drenched with desire. "Keep on going."

As he took all Kamishiro had to offer, Yuuki felt his arms get weak. He had been clinging so tightly to Kamishiro's back, it was probably covered with scratches by now. Yuuki was about to apologize, but was interrupted by a powerful thrust that left him speechless.

"Ahh…" he moaned again.

Even Yuuki couldn't make any sense of the sounds that erupted from his mouth. He grit his teeth against the pain and rode out the paroxysms of pleasure. As Kamishiro thrusted deeper and deeper inside him, saliva dripped from Yuuki's lips. Kamishiro lapped it up with his tongue, sending chills down Yuuki's spine.

Yuuki came again, spurting on Kamishiro's stomach and the hem of his shirt. Tossed and turned by sheer ecstasy, Yuuki was reduced to a creature of his lusts.

"More…" he begged. "More…"

All he could do was repeat the words over and over. Suddenly Kamishiro grasped his buttocks and plunged into his deepest depths. As Kamishiro kept thrusting inside the quivering, fleshy folds, Yuuki's eyes flew open.

Now it was Kamishiro's turn. His moans echoed around the small room.

"Hah! Hah! Hah!" Kamishiro panted, in search of his own orgasm.

Suddenly, the bed stopped creaking as warm desire poured out of his cock. As he spurted out the last drop, Kamishiro's body shook with a small tremor. After a long sigh, he finally pulled out of Yuuki.

But spasms kept raging through Yuuki's body, and with a wet, gooshing rush, his white waterfall again overflowed.

"Sorry," Yuuki whispered.

Why are you apologizing? Kamishiro wanted to say, but he didn't even have the strength to ask the question.

Chapter 6

"Looks like you're getting a bit of a curl at the ends," Yuuki observed.

"I guess so," Kamishiro grunted back.

"The weather's turned cold, but how about a little trim?"

Yuuki picked up the scissors and leaned over. He was waiting for an okay, but it didn't come.

A single chair sat in front of the bathroom mirror, with newspapers spread underneath. It was obvious that Kamishiro had something else in mind when Yuuki had asked him to take off his clothes.

"You're going to use those things?" Kamishiro shuddered, staring at the sharp silver scissors. He was clearly flustered, and maybe even a little afraid.

"Oh, please. You're always playing with knives in the kitchen," Yuuki reminded him.

"Two different things," Kamishiro said stoutly.

"C'mon, take your clothes off."

"Can't you cut it with my clothes on?"

"It's a pain to clean up afterward. Hair sticks to your clothes, and it won't come out in the wash."

When Kamishiro still resisted, Yuuki told him that a man who had stripped naked on the first day they met should have nothing to be embarrassed about.

Finally Kamishiro pulled his t-shirt over his head.

Yuuki nibbled on his shoulders.

"Maybe first we should do the thing you really like to get undressed for," Yuuki cooed.

He put his hands around Kamishiro's waist and licked off the sweat beading up on his skin. Kamishiro jerked a little, which was more than enough encouragement. Yuuki bent down and started sucking on his nipple.

"Haa…" Kamishiro gasped.

Shall I continue? Yuuki asked with his eyes.

"Whatever strikes your fancy. Just don't get carried away with yourself."

In lieu of background music, the television was blaring from the living room. The morning sunlight streamed in through the skylight. Yuuki's muffled laughter only added to the atmosphere.

While they were having breakfast that morning, Yuuki had offered to cut Kamishiro's hair.

"Right now?" Kamishiro whined. Watching him grudgingly strip off his jeans was so enjoyable that Yuuki could hardly stand it.

"What length do you think is good?" Kamishiro asked.

Yuuki laughed so hard that tears came to his eyes as Kamishiro stood there in his lily-white briefs.

"Okay. Go ahead and cut it," Kamishiro sighed, but Yuuki's hands suddenly started to tremble.

"D-don't worry," he nervously assured him. "I'm a pro. I cut my grandfather's hair sometimes."

"Just don't lop off an ear or cut my throat, okay?"

With a meek expression on his face, Kamishiro sat quietly in the chair with a towel around his neck.

"I've got to wet it down," Yuuki said.

"Whatever," Kamishiro sighed in resignation, throwing in the towel, so to speak.

Yuuki ran a comb through Kamishiro's damp locks, lifted up a piece, and snipped. Bits of black hair fluttered down and speckled the white towel.

"That tickles," Kamishiro grunted.

"Sorry."

As Yuuki kept on snipping, bits of hair drifted to the floor.

"I'd like the menu to change with the seasons," Yuuki said.

Now that he'd gotten his hands on such a high-class chef, the owner of Fuuka was eager to put him to good use. Yuuki made the suggestion as he gazed out the window at the unmistakable signs of autumn.

During the day they were employer and employee, but as soon as closing time rolled around, they sought out the pleasures of each other's bodies.

Every night, in the bed that had once seemed so lonely, Yuuki enjoyed having sex with Kamishiro. But during the day, they made a point to only talk business. If they didn't, every sigh or innocent gesture would arouse their appetites even more.

"Because summer vegetables aren't in season anymore," Yuuki went on.

"You mean shift from leafy vegetables to roots and tubers?" Kamishiro asked. He took out Yuuki's daily produce from the cardboard box: cauliflower, potato, sweet potato, cabbage, *daikon* radish. Suddenly Kamishiro frowned.

"You need to think these things through, you know."

"Ah, hell," Yuuki whined, reaching out to swat the chef. "No matter what I suggest, you always say it's a bad idea."

"Hey, you!" Kamishiro laughed, quickly ducking away. They simply couldn't touch each other, not even when they were joking around. Because one thing always led to another, and soon they'd be falling into bed together instead of opening the café.

The days went on. One morning, Yuuki heard a loud barking sound from outside. When he looked out to see what it was, Kamishiro was standing there with a mutt.

"You can't be serious! Are you really bringing that thing in here?" Yuuki protested. The dog looked up at Kamishiro with a crestfallen expression. Kamishiro gave it a sympathetic smile.

"Sorry, buddy, he says no. Guess you're too scary."

Even more than an amateur like Yuuki, Kamishiro should have been a little more concerned about kitchen sanitation. Yet he looked utterly dejected at the thought of kicking out the dog.

"Well, let's go, Jonko," Kamishiro sighed.

A strange name for a canine that he first thought was a male. As he listened to Kamishiro babbling at the dog, Yuuki realized that he'd been a little harsh. Maybe it was time to drop his defenses and take a few risks.

Smiling to himself, Yuuki watched the human and his four-footed friend clumsily descend the hill together.

"I must be kidding myself," Yuuki muttered. Nothing earthshaking had happened. The same-old, same-old continued just like before, or so he wanted to believe.

Yuuki wanted them to be just like any other couple, but he knew that would never happen. He couldn't bear the thought of parting with the passions aroused by Kamishiro's clumsy, earnest lovemaking.

Those passions had cost him Shin. But after finding this precious peace with Kamishiro, Yuuki found it easy to turn away from the rest of his life. He still felt guilty, so he sought out Kamishiro every night and drowned himself in pleasure.

"This side is pretty short," Kamishiro complained.

"Aw, c'mon. It's not exactly a buzz cut."

"I know, I know. Just shut up already."

Yuuki evened up the right and left sides of Kamishiro's hair with a scrupulous eye. Though Yuuki had claimed it was only a trim, Kamishiro's hair was now a good inch shorter.

He brushed aside Kamishiro's bangs and pushed back the curly wisps that covered his ears. Kamishiro's unkempt hair was usually covered by a bandana, but when it was combed, he became a different man entirely.

Yuuki stood back and gave Kamishiro a good look, scanning over his rugged features.

"How about a shave?" Yuuki asked. He blew the hair off the hands and smiled. It was a complete turnaround from a month ago, when they had first met. Now Yuuki's voice was filled with affection and concern.

"Kamishiro-san, everything in your life except cooking is a total mess. Your face always has stubble on it somewhere."

"I can shave myself, thank you very much. When it comes to razor blades—"

"You still don't trust me," Yuuki sniffed. "Let's see your face, then."

He took a razor and shaving cream from the shelf and went to work. Surprisingly, Kamishiro didn't protest.

"Your beard stings something fierce when you don't shave, you know," Yuuki grumbled.

"No, it doesn't. It feels like heaven."

He wasn't wrong, but the way he said it pissed Yuuki off a little. Only this morning he awoke to find Kamishiro's head against his chest. The slight stimulation set his cheeks aflame. When Kamishiro buried his face between his legs, Yuuki definitely felt the rough stubble grazing his thighs.

"Shut up and raise your chin," Yuuki directed, like an adult addressing a child.

"Okay, okay," Kamishiro sighed, and then he pressed his lips together.

Yuuki smeared shaving cream all over Kamishiro's face, then just stared at the top of his head for several seconds, working up his nerve.

"What's up? I look good with a little stubble, don't I? This face is too good to waste, right?"

"This uncouth, unshaven face of yours is the real waste," Yuuki clucked.

He leaned over and ran the razor over the white foam. The slick track of skin that appeared behind the blade shone in the light.

"Your skin is really smooth," Yuuki said.

"Not as smooth as yours," Kamishiro smiled, reaching out to Yuuki.

Yuuki thought that Kamishiro was going to hug him, but instead he pinched his cheeks.

"Ow! That hurts! They're not toys, you know," Yuuki griped.

"But your cheeks look so luscious," Kamishiro said.

"Enough already. Close your mouth again."

"Yes, doctor," Kamishiro replied meekly.

Yuuki grinned despite himself as he put the finishing touches to Kamishiro's face. Close enough to feel Kamishiro's breath on his face, Yuuki felt desire building within him.

"Yow!" Kamishiro yelled suddenly.

At the very tip of his chin, a tiny nick spurted a line of red blood. Yuuki stuck out his tongue and licked the wound.

"Ick," he muttered. Kamishiro gave him a glare.

"What? Don't you like the taste of my blood?"

"The shaving cream tastes bad," Yuuki explained. "Your blood tastes a little salty."

He leaned over and gave Kamishiro a peck on his pouting lips.

"But I don't hate it," he whispered in a hoarse voice.

After two or three more kisses on his chin, Yuuki ran his tongue down to the nape of Kamishiro's neck. The razor fell from his hand to the floor. He wiped away the last traces of shaving cream with his thumb, and brushed Kamishiro's hair back with his hands.

Yuuki stepped back to admire his work. There was Kamishiro's familiar face, but looking a little different than usual.

He almost reminds me of Tsukada, Yuuki thought sadly.

A few short hours had passed since daybreak, and yet his body—still bearing lingering memories from last night—began to throb of its own volition.

"We still have time, you know," he said softly.

"Ah."

Turning his back to the mirror, Yuuki sat in Kamishiro's lap and straddled his thighs. He licked off a dot of shaving cream from the tip of Kamishiro's nose, and then puckered his mouth.

"Hmm…" Yuuki moaned, as they tightly pressed their lips together.

Yuuki darted his tongue inside Kamishiro's mouth and took his temperature. Kamishiro quickly responded with a moan.

Suddenly their lips parted and a puff of air escaped. Then Kamishiro stuck out just the tip of his tongue. In the room filled with morning sunlight, they entwined their tongues as their bodies exploded with sensation.

Then Yuuki thrust his hips forward, demanding even more loving caresses.

"You mean you want it here?" Kamishiro smiled, stroking Yuuki's buttocks and thighs. His low, sexy purr made Yuuki break out in goose bumps.

"No!" Yuuki cried out, his loins undulating with increased intensity.

But he hadn't gotten himself all worked up just to scamper off in a huff. His pulsating groin almost beyond his control, Yuuki got off Kamishiro's lap.

"Not a morning person, eh?" Kamishiro teased.

"Morning has nothing to do with it. I want to do what I want to do," Yuuki said firmly, kneeling between Kamishiro's legs.

Usually the hair scattered across the floor would have grossed him out, but he didn't even notice it. Crouching on all fours like a dog, Yuuki ran his tongue across the cross-hatched scar on Kamishiro's right leg.

Kamishiro shuddered and started to get up, but Yuuki quickly grabbed his ankles and licked the scar again. Kamishiro's whole body tensed like he had just orgasmed.

"Yuuki…" Kamishiro gasped.

After several days of sleeping together, Yuuki had finally gotten Kamishiro to stop calling him "Sano-san." But so far he only called him "Yuuki" as sort of a joke.

"Whoa, that's risky territory there," Kamishiro gasped again.

For some reason, Kamishiro's gasps were really turning Yuuki on. He was only licking Kamishiro's old wounds, and yet Yuuki's loins began to burn.

"Risky territory? Let's try a place even riskier," Yuuki said seductively, diving his hands inside Kamishiro's tighty-whiteys.

"Haaaa!" Kamishiro gasped, looking flustered, but Yuuki ignored him.

He parted the dark bush of pubic hair and grabbed Kamishiro's erect penis. Without a moment's hesitation, Yuuki took it into his mouth.

As Yuuki started to suck, his hair fell across his face. He impatiently pushed it back and kept on sucking, indulging himself with Kamishiro's sweet, sweet flesh. When Yuuki drew in his cheeks, Kamishiro's erection brushed against the side of his mouth, leaving behind a salty taste.

Without lifting his head, Yuuki put his right hand around the base of Kamishiro's rod and rubbed the shaft with his left. The rest of the penis, from the middle to the tip, Yuuki covered with his mouth, fanning the flames of Kamishiro's desire.

"You!" Kamishiro cried, his waist slowly pumping back and forth.

He was definitely succumbing to the pleasure. Yuuki reached his finger behind Kamishiro's cock and massaged the back of his pouch. Kamishiro's thighs suddenly clamped around Yuuki's wrist, sending a pleasant heat down his arm.

"Son of a bitch!" Kamishiro shrieked, getting up.

Suddenly Yuuki found himself being lifted up like a feather, followed by what sounded very much like a child spitting out a lollipop. He licked the saliva from his lips and grinned.

"If you want to do it, let's go to bed," Kamishiro moaned, his penis poking out from the opening of his underwear.

"Why? Right here is just fine," Yuuki purred.

He cleared his throat in a most ungentlemanly fashion, and then grabbed the can of shaving cream.

"You can't be serious," choked Kamishiro, looking panicked all of a sudden. "You are not shaving me down there."

"I'd never do something stupid like that," Yuuki insisted, though he couldn't repress a smile at the very idea. Instead he squirted shaving cream on Kamishiro's stomach.

A sensation completely different from human touch made Kamishiro's butt twitch all over.

"Too cold?" Yuuki asked, wet with lust.

"Cut it out!" Kamishiro snapped.

"But I won't shave a thing, I promise."

What Yuuki was going to do was much more exciting. He turned his back to Kamishiro and dropped his pants, then slowly lowered himself on Kamishiro's cock.

"Ahhhh…" Yuuki sighed, as Kamishiro's hard member penetrated him with a squelching sound. The unusual sound as Kamishiro entered him made Yuuki wonder if the shaving cream was such a good idea. But halfway in and halfway out, it was way too late to retreat.

"Haa…haa…Kamishiro-san…"

Yuuki panted for Kamishiro to screw the rest into him, jam it in deep. He lowered his hips, but Kamishiro's cock still didn't quite hit the mark.

"I *said* let's do it in the bedroom," Kamishiro grunted, getting to his feet. Toppled off balance, Yuuki lunged forward and had to grab the edge of the sink.

"Ahh…haaaa—"

"I need a towel," Kamishiro said calmly.

"A what?"

"I need to wipe my face and put on aftershave, or I'll get razor rash."

Kamishiro whistled cheerfully as he rummaged around the shelf above the sink, totally ignoring Yuuki's animal desires.

"Where the hell is a towel?" he muttered.

"It…won't…be…up…there…" Yuuki panted, still holding onto the sink.

"Sex can wait. My tender skin can't."

What a big meanie! Yuuki thought, tears springing to his eyes. He grabbed a towel from another shelf and tossed it to Kamishiro.

"I was going to wipe you down, really I was," Yuuki apologized.

"I want a hot, steamy towel. Shall we throw it in the microwave?" Kamishiro suggested.

"Are you joking?"

"Yeah, just kidding," Kamishiro snorted, slapping Yuuki's ass with the palm of his hand.

"That's mean," Yuuki pouted.

"Yeah. But you still need to wait a minute, okay?"

Yuuki looked in the mirror and watched Kamishiro wipe off his face and then slap his cheeks with aftershave. Then he moved behind Yuuki and nibbled on his ear.

"Thanks for waiting," he whispered.

"No problem," Yuuki sighed, wondering what was coming up next.

Now a completely different aroma wafted from Kamishiro as he sucked the back of Yuuki's neck. Yuuki stuck out his behind, allowing Kamishiro to enter him. Seeing their union reflected in the mirror, he closed his eyes.

"Hah…ahhhh…ahhhh…"

Who was this pumping him like a piston from behind? As Kamishiro stroked his penis with his hand, Yuuki started to moan. But compared to his memories of Tsukada, these sweet caresses were tinged with bitterness.

"Spread your legs wider," Kamishiro directed.

"I can't…" Yuuki gasped.

Kamishiro quickly pushed down his jeans for him. Yuuki extracted his right leg and spread his legs as requested.

"Ahh…ahh…ohhhh…"

Yuuki's fingers were the same color as the beige sink he held onto for dear life, supporting himself against violent thrusts that shook his body. Having once closed his eyes, he couldn't seem to open them again. For a moment, he didn't even know which man was violating the inside of his body.

"Hah…hah…ahhhhh…"

Without waiting for Kamishiro to come, Yuuki ejaculated first, splashing the low shelves near his feet. Kamishiro held onto Yuuki's waist, to keep him from falling over. Too weak to withstand the constant thrusting, Yuuki slumped against the sink.

"So you got greedy and came all by yourself, eh?" Kamishiro muttered in a dull voice. All traces of affection seemed totally gone.

Yuuki wanted to believe that Kamishiro was simply exhausted from their energetic coupling. He didn't remember if he had called out Tsukada's name in the heat of passion, but Kamishiro must have sensed who Yuuki really wanted to have inside him.

Why shouldn't he be upset? Yuuki thought. Nobody wanted to be a substitute for someone else. Yuuki would have understood perfectly if Kamishiro had pushed him away. Suddenly Kamishiro pushed his finger between Yuuki's clenched teeth.

"You'll end up with a crooked bite," Kamishiro warned. "If you need to take a breather, suck on this. Have a little chew, if you please."

"Uhhh…" Yuuki mumbled.

The alignment of his teeth was the last thing on his mind right now, but he did as told and sucked on Kamishiro's finger. Kamishiro didn't give a damn about shaving or cutting his hair, but his fingernails were always carefully manicured. This was crucial for people who cooked, he claimed.

As Kamishiro carefully probed the inside of his mouth, Yuuki's limp privates stiffened again.

More, he thought wildly, as Kamishiro stroked inside his cheek.

Suddenly Kamishiro took out his fingers and grabbed Yuuki's chin. Now Kamishiro's lips traveled from Yuuki's earlobe to his cheek to the corner of his mouth.

Yuuki started to moan. Twisting his neck, he answered with a kiss.

Their tongues entwined again with vigor. A wave of desire pounded Yuuki's loins. He felt his temperature rise and ejaculated for the second time.

"Haaaa…aaaah…aaaaah…"

Was that him sighing, or Kamishiro? Yuuki opened his eyes, but quickly looked away from the image in the mirror.

"Hey, Kamishiro-san! Nice haircut!" a girl was saying.

"Was it your idea? Or did somebody twist your arm?" the other girl asked.

"I liked it better before. Why did you go and cut it?"

"No way! This looks cooler on him!"

They sat at the counter and teased Kamishiro about how cute he was. Kamishiro smiled wryly and scooped ice cream. He knew there wasn't a "cute" bone in his large, rugged body.

It was after dinner, and the usual pair of high school girls were their only customers. Since they never ordered anything but ice cream, Kamishiro didn't need to hang around. Yuuki tilted his head toward the house, indicating that it was fine for Kamishiro to leave, but the king of the kitchen stubbornly stayed where he was.

When Kamishiro was in the kitchen, the girls always sat at the counter. Tonight they wore their black winter sailor uniforms, hiking up their skirts even higher than their typical "summer" outfits.

Every time they swung their legs, they played peek-a-boo with their thighs, but Kamishiro didn't even bother to look. Yuuki wondered if he should lead them back to their usual seats. But if they wanted to flash a little booty, let them flash it at Kamishiro and leave him alone.

"Kamishiro-san, you got a girlfriend?" one of them asked.

Unlike Yuuki, whom she'd known since he was a backpack-toting kid, this stranger had an instant appeal.

Kamishiro smiled and shrugged.

"Sure," he said.

"That sucks! Really?" she whined.

"Something wrong with that?"

"Where is she? Back in Sapporo?"

Taken aback by their nosiness, Kamishiro winked at Yuuki instead.

That was the same question I've been wanting to ask him, Yuuki thought, feeling disappointed.

"Not Sapporo. She showed up after I came here," Kamishiro said.

"Seriously?" the girls cried, as the air went out of their balloons.

Now they were dead set on wringing information

out of him. Yuuki felt uncomfortable, but laughing Kamishiro seemed to take them in his stride.

You're not here to entertain the customers, Yuuki thought. He set two big ice cream sundaes in front of the girls and glared at Kamishiro.

"Yuuki-chan would know," the big girl said.

"No. I mean, that kind of thing is Kamishiro's business," Yuuki said weakly.

"Tell us. Who is it?" she persisted.

Stumped for an answer, Yuuki silently cursed Kamishiro, who was feigning innocence back in the kitchen.

Just you wait until later! Yuuki thought. There would definitely be payback after closing time. Suddenly the front door opened.

"What in the—!" Yuuki gasped, but the rest of the sentence didn't make it out of his mouth. The last person he ever expected to see at Fuuka again was gazing right at him.

"Shin?"

"Long time no see," Shin said casually, looking like nothing was out of the ordinary. He looked around the café, and then ambled up to the counter.

"Okay if I sit here?" he asked politely.

"Uh, sure."

Shin moved to a stool at the very end of the counter, the one that used to belong to Tsukada. Yuuki didn't have the heart to tell him to move.

The usual time, the usual place. Was this farce they called friendship about to continue on its merry way? What had happened on that rainy night had ended his relationship with Shin. Now he was involved with Kamishiro, but Yuuki couldn't stop feeling that none of this was real.

"So you finally stopped by for a bite to eat?" Kamishiro called from the kitchen.

"Yeah."

Kamishiro knew what Shin had done to Yuuki, but still faced the man with a smile. True, he was a little surprised to see him, but certainly not to the same extent as Yuuki.

"Well, that's that," Yuuki muttered to himself. He ignored Kamishiro's gaze and set a glass in front of Shin.

There were so many things he wanted to say, where could he even start? The more Yuuki thought about it, the more confused he felt. Just what should he tell Shin right now? Feeling overwhelmed, Yuuki headed for the kitchen.

"Sano, just a sec," Shin called out to him.

Startled Yuuki stopped in his tracks. Shin grabbed his wrist and pulled him closer.

"Shin," Yuuki protested.

Shin stood on tiptoe and gazed at Yuuki's face. His eyes moved to the scars still visible along the nape of Yuuki's neck. Yuuki started to sweat.

"What happened to—?" Shin gasped.

"I'm fine. Forget about it," Yuuki said in a clipped tone.

Shin didn't seem to want to pursue the matter, and started to talk to Kamishiro in the kitchen. Every once in a while, he bantered with the girls.

They had been in the café together on countless occasions, yet this was the first time Shin had spoken to them directly. Yuuki scowled at himself as he attempted to eavesdrop on them.

"We have some nice sea bream, would you like some poêler style?" Kamishiro suggested.

"Po-what?" Shin grunted, looking blank.

"Braised in butter."

"Well, why didn't you say so in the first place?" Shin smirked.

Yuuki burst out laughing. Some of the tension drained from his body.

"Forget the damn fish. I like red meat better," Shin said cheekily.

Was he pretending to forget that terrible night? Yuuki suddenly felt like a load had been lifted off his shoulders. He put his hand on his chest and heaved a deep sigh.

"I'll take a beer, too," Shin said.

"Did you drive here?" Kamishiro asked seriously.

"Nah, left the car at home."

Sorry about last time, his apologetic face seemed to say.

"Say, if I do get sloshed, could I just crash here tonight?" Shin asked with a smile. "Finding a taxi this time of night is a bloody pain. Camping out on the floor is fine by me."

"Um, well…" Yuuki muttered, stalling for time.

Yuuki and Kamishiro exchanged glances. Well, that was that. If Shin stayed here tonight, they would have to put their "other" plans on hold.

"Wow. This is good," Shin beamed, digging into a perfectly-grilled steak.

As usual, he had arrived at Fuuka on an empty stomach. He shoveled the meat into his mouth like so much hamburger, his eyes sparkling like a little kid's.

"Nothing beats a cold beer after work," Shin declared, but his effusive smile provided no insight into his soul.

He chewed his way through Kamishiro's cooking, and then lit an after-dinner cigarette. The smoke drifted across the counter and was sucked up by the ventilation fan.

"Yeah, that really hit the spot," Shin said, pushing away his empty plate.

After another drag, he stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray as Yuuki watched. Shin seemed cheerful, but the way he extinguished his cigarette hinted at some deeper, darker emotions.

"You know something?" he asked Kamishiro.

"What?" the chef asked idly.

"You two are quite a pair," he muttered, just as there was a break in the classical music that flowed through the café.

The eyes of the two girls sitting next to him popped wide open.

Oh, come on! their expressions seemed to say, looking back and forth between Yuuki and Kamishiro.

"Don't," Yuuki warned, but Shin was just getting started.

"I spy a few wicked hickeys. You must be really rocking in bed, huh?" he said slyly.

"Shin."

"Thumbs down to me, thumbs up to him. I'm sure there's a reason for that."

"Shin, you—"

Shin jerked his thumb at Kamishiro in the kitchen.

"So this guy crossed home plate first, huh? That really sucks ass. I barely got to second base."

Kamishiro had been holding his tongue the whole time. Now he was glaring at Shin.

"Uh, we'll just pay and go," one of the girls said, tossing a thousand yen note on the counter. They darted out of the café before Yuuki could even give them their change.

"It's because you're so damned easy," Shin continued with a crooked grin. "I was biding my time, keeping my hands to myself, and then some guy moves in under my nose and gets to play with you 24/7. You played me for a fool, Yuuki."

"Stop it, Shin!" Yuuki snapped back.

He couldn't stand to see the painful look on Shin's face while he verbally abused him. Their screams echoed around the empty café.

Who was this person? In all the years they had known each other, Shin had never treated him this way.

I turned him into this, Yuuki thought guiltily. *I'm making him say these terrible things.*

"If I knew you were this easy, I would have run the bases with you that night."

"Shin, please! I'm begging you!"

Standing eyeball-to-eyeball with Kamishiro, Shin continued to assault Yuuki with words, but the way his hands quivered on the counter suggested that these were not Shin's true feelings.

After Tsukada died, Shin helped fill the gaping hole left behind, though they had no physical connection between them. Even now, Yuuki believed that Shin had really gone out of his way for him.

I should have jumped into his arms back then, Yuuki thought. That regret was coupled with the regret of losing a dear friend.

Yuuki gazed at Shin's profile, a combination of sadness and resignation. He stood there like a stump, not moving a muscle. Why was Shin acting like this now? Yuuki knew the answer, though he didn't want to admit it to himself. The sad truth was that he had rejected Shin and sought refuge in Kamishiro's arms. But how could he ever find the words to apologize?

"And yet this is the guy who killed him," Shin said, staring at Kamishiro.

"K-killed—?"

"You were going to hide that fact forever, weren't you? But you killed Tsukada."

Kamishiro killed Tsukada?

Yuuki noticed a slight quiver in Shin's voice, but Kamishiro said nothing in his own defense. He didn't run. He didn't turn away. He just stared back at Shin without twitching an eyebrow.

"Kamishiro-san?" Yuuki gasped, attempting to smile through his tears.

The pitiful look in Kamishiro's eyes told him everything he needed to know. Yuuki suddenly touched his own face. His cheek felt ice cold, a chill that enveloped his whole body.

Shin leaned over the counter toward Kamishiro.

"Are you here to atone for your sins? Or was Sano so pathetic that you felt sorry for him? Was that it? Was that why you wagged your ass in his face?"

"Shin!" Yuuki cried, slapping Shin across the face.

Shin was spinning out of control and Yuuki wanted to stop him. Or maybe he just didn't want to hear what Kamishiro had to say.

"Do you mean you knew about this, Yuuki? You knew and slept with him anyway?" Shin spat out, pressing his hand against his red cheek.

"What do you mean I knew?" Yuuki said desperately.

Tsukada had died in an accident, but Shin was now claiming that Kamishiro killed him. It had to be a lie. Yuuki glanced anxiously at Kamishiro. *Tell me it isn't true! Just say it isn't true!*

"You're right. I killed him," Kamishiro said, looking straight at Shin. "It's my fault that Tsukada's dead."

"Kamishiro-san!" Yuuki gasped.

Could it be true? Could the man whose warmth he had sought out and devoured, the man who made his skin tremble with joy—

"I'm sorry I never told you, Yuuki," Kamishiro said quietly.

He sounds kind of relieved, Yuuki thought. Now

Kamishiro's past was finally exposed for all to see.

Kamishiro really had nothing to apologize for, and it vaguely occurred to Yuuki that he ought to say so. He knew that others had been injured in the avalanche, but it had never occurred to Yuuki that Kamishiro might have been one of them.

Showing up out of the blue, insisting on working for peanuts, no history other than his résumé—it all made sense now. Yuuki just had never connected the dots.

"If I hadn't lost my footing that day, he wouldn't have died."

Yuuki didn't answer, had nothing to say. Out of all the members of that expedition party, why did only Tsukada suffer the cruel vicissitudes of fate?

"So you forgot all about Tsukada and jumped into bed with his killer," Shin accused.

Though cursed as a murderer, Kamishiro looked steadily at Yuuki.

"He hasn't forgotten about him," he insisted.

He didn't seem to be saying this to get Yuuki to agree with him. He wasn't criticizing Shin. Maybe he was just trying to convince himself.

"He didn't forget. Not at all," Kamishiro repeated.

No, Yuuki hadn't forgotten. After all, he was trying to make Kamishiro into a substitute Tsukada.

"You are a real piece of work," Shin grimaced.

"He's not the kind of person who casually throws the past away," Kamishiro stated clearly.

Shin abruptly stopped his stream of abuse. Yuuki felt that Kamishiro was suggesting that Yuuki could still love him, even if he could never forget Tsukada. Let he who is without sin, the proverb went. That's what he was trying to get Shin to understand.

Shin could have brushed the statement aside, but he stared back at Kamishiro with his mouth wide open.

"What dumb crap are you spouting?" he snapped.

"I think that applies to both of us."

"I guess so," Shin muttered to himself.

Yuuki almost thought that he was hearing things, since Shin's voice was so hard to understand.

"A friend like you is important to Yuuki. If that rainy night hadn't happened, nothing would have happened between us, either."

"Then I'm the bigger fool in all this," Shin groaned. He quickly left the café with slumped shoulders. Yuuki didn't bother to run after him. Nothing could change the fact that he had rejected Shin.

"I'm sorry, Yuuki," Kamishiro said suddenly.

What is he apologizing for now? Yuuki wondered. For Tsukada's death? For deceiving Yuuki? Or was he sorry that they'd even slept together?

Yuuki couldn't be sure, and Kamishiro didn't elaborate.

Chapter 7

"You knew everything all along?" Yuuki blurted out.

Kamishiro didn't answer. His back was turned, so Yuuki couldn't read the expression on his face. But he could imagine, and that alone made his heart ache. Even when he closed his eyes, Kamishiro was still there.

Sleep with me already!

When Yuuki had raged against him that day, Kamishiro had looked at him with those same sad eyes. Even when Kamishiro was making love to him, he seemed to be gritting his teeth to endure the pain.

Then again, hadn't Yuuki closed his own eyes, too? Every time Kamishiro held Yuuki in his arms, his sins must have resurrected in his mind. Maybe he had slept with him in the first place to atone for his crime.

And if he had, that was sad beyond words. Yuuki frowned as he recalled how foolish he had been.

"Why didn't you tell me earlier?"

"If I had, you never would have hired me. I wanted to be the arm you could lean on in Tsukada's place."

"What makes you think I needed an arm to lean on?" Yuuki snapped, hating Kamishiro's matter-of-fact answer. "I didn't know the first thing about you! I didn't ask for your help, and you shouldn't have barged in where you didn't belong!"

Yuuki couldn't hurl this abuse at him face-to-face. With his back turned, his rage expressed itself in his shaking shoulders. The anger fouled the air with malice, and Yuuki was glad that this was not the time of day when customers were likely to stop by.

"I thought I had been asked," Kamishiro insisted.

"By who? By me?"

"By Tsukada-san."

Yuuki did not want to look at Kamishiro, but he couldn't help but turn around. Kamishiro's face looked blurry through Yuuki's veil of tears. Though his vision was clouded, he saw that Kamishiro was hanging his head.

"What do you mean, Tsukada-san said—"

"I met him three years ago on Asahidake Mountain. He told me a lot about you. I often asked him to bring you along, but he said you were a homebody. Tsukada liked knowing someone was there waiting for him. Then he could never die. Nothing bad would ever happen to him."

But if anything happens, take care of him for me. Was that a joke? Or was Tsukada being serious? Moments before the avalanche swallowed them up, the look in Tsukada's eyes had said, *Don't forget.*

Or so Kamishiro thought. But with the avalanche barreling down upon them, who knows what Tsukada was thinking? Rational thought at such a time would have been impossible.

"Why did you come here now?"

"Yuuki—"

"If you wanted to apologize, you should have gone to his parents instead."

"I did before I came here. That's where I heard your name mentioned."

"My name? By Tsukada's parents?"

The look that Kamishiro gave Yuuki telegraphed his regret at the delay. Because of him, memories that had faded with time had been brought painfully into the present.

"With you not around, I would have been able to put this all behind me someday," Yuuki muttered. If not this year, then the year after that. Or maybe it would take ten years, who knows? But he finally would have found a way to put those ghosts to rest.

"The scars on your leg."

"Ah."

Kamishiro still dragged his leg. Swept along by the hard snow, had he suffered a serious compound fracture? Yuuki had heard that Tsukada's body showed no visible scars. Had Kamishiro's blood marked the place where he lay buried? Had he groaned in agony, screaming to his companions, while Tsukada's life had been snuffed out before he could even speak?

"Were you in the hospital a long time?"

"Three months. Another six months in rehab."

But he was still alive. He was still alive, unlike poor Tsukada.

Yuuki should hate him for that. He stared at Kamishiro's right leg, but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't blame him for surviving.

"You didn't kill Tsukada-san. And I'm not angry about an accident that happened a year ago. That's the truth. I don't know enough about the mountains to come to the conclusion that you killed him."

Yuuki looked into Kamishiro's eyes and continued.

"When Tsukada-san died, I attended the funeral as a friend. Not as family, and certainly not as his lover. Even on the night his remains were returned, his parents made no effort to contact me. That's how little I meant to them. And frankly, you don't strike me as the Good Samaritan type, either."

As Yuuki spelled out the cold, hard facts, he somehow felt they were talking about a stranger.

One day after Tsukada's death, Yuuki had thrown himself at Takai's feet and confessed everything in his heart. Afterward, the solid mass of grief in his heart began to melt, but only slightly. Knowing that it would never disappear entirely, Yuuki gave up raging against the dying of the light and tried to let things settle of their own accord. But forgetting about Tsukada—and forgiving Kamishiro—was probably impossible now.

"So Tsukada's parents know who I am?"

Just what had they told Kamishiro? Even if they vaguely knew of their son's sexual orientation, Yuuki had never imagined that his existence mattered to them. That was why he didn't even bother to speak to them at the funeral. Kamishiro was exposing all his raw nerves to the light. He turned to him and forced a smile.

"You've done enough, Kamishiro-san."

"Eh?"

"Sorry to be such a taskmaster up till now. I don't intend to take advantage of you any longer. You can go now."

"Yuuki."

Don't call me that, Yuuki wanted to say. But he was afraid if he raised his voice, his throat would tear apart.

"As long as you're around, I'll never be able to forget. It'll be nothing but pain and misery," he said, as calmly as he could.

"Yuuki—"

"Don't call me that! Get out! Get out already!"

If he called him by his first name one more time, Yuuki could never hold back his tears. Why did Kamishiro have to tell him about Tsukada? He wanted him to leave before it really sunk in.

Tsukada had died, and Kamishiro had blamed himself for the accident. Some man he'd never seen before came to lend a hand in Tsukada's place. It didn't matter what—physically or spiritually—Kamishiro had read into the meaning of "being there for him."

He had been hiding from him every time they went to bed together. Now Yuuki was incapable of forgiving him. Suddenly he remembered their first encounter, when Kamishiro had come in with that bright yellow backpack. He had posed as a man living hand to mouth, and Yuuki had totally believed him.

Kamishiro certainly couldn't have quit his previous job on the best of terms. Even though Kamishiro insisted he could get by on minimum wage, Yuuki doubted he was rolling in money. His medical bills after the accident must have been enormous.

Tell me something first—

If he could roll back the clock to that summer day, Yuuki wished he had asked more questions.

"I don't need your sympathy."

"That's not it," Kamishiro said, but verbal denials were hard to believe. Or rather, Yuuki didn't want to believe them in the first place.

He must have appeared so comical to Kamishiro. Such a stupid drama queen.

"I'm sorry," Kamishiro said again.

His voice sounded far, far away. Those clumsy footsteps that Yuuki's ears had become accustomed to seemed heavier than usual. Yuuki closed his eyes and listened to the odd rhythm of Kamishiro's gait. He opened them to see Kamishiro standing there with his backpack, his only piece of luggage.

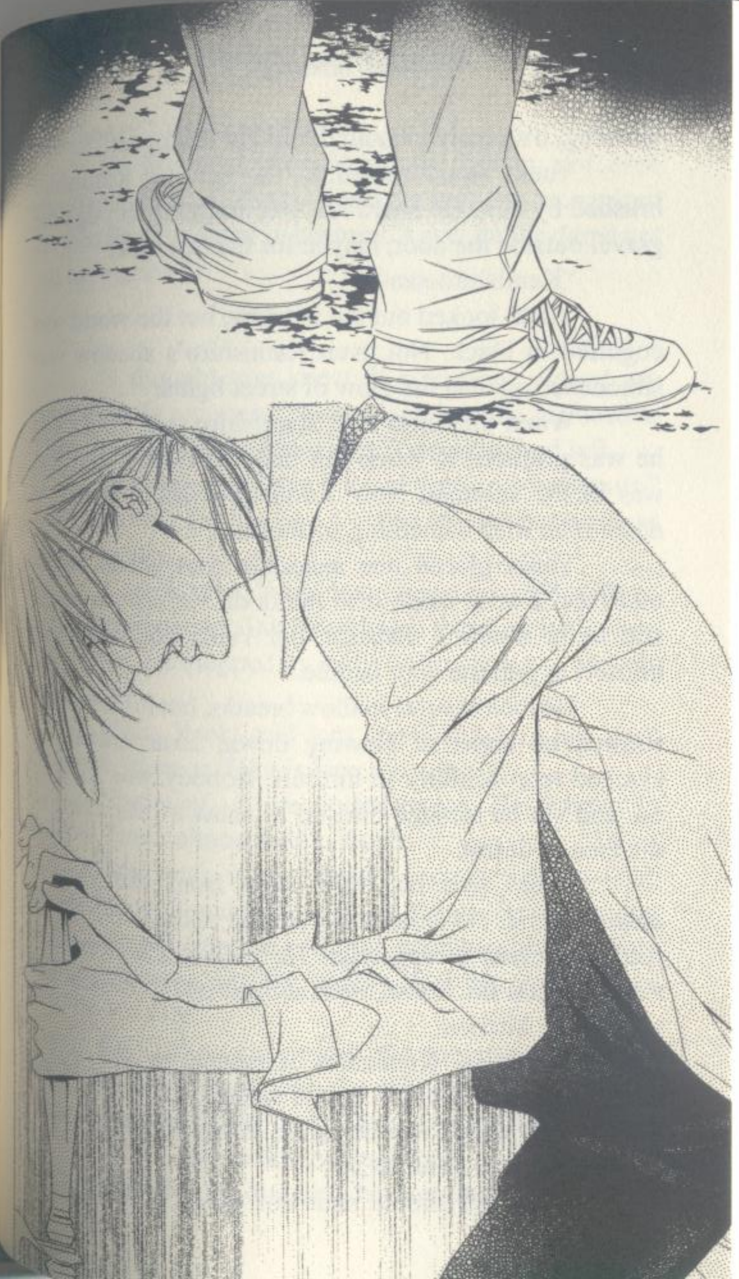
He was wearing the same sneakers, still grimy with the dust of the road. He had removed the bandana, but still wore his cook's outfit. Whether he took the bus or hitchhiked, he couldn't help but look like an overgrown trick-or-treater who had missed Halloween.

Needless to say, at this time of night, no trains would be stopping at the station. After he kicked him out, Kamishiro would have no place else to go. Staring out the window at the dark landscape, Yuuki suddenly felt uneasy.

"Well, then," Kamishiro said.

"Ah."

Was he really leaving? Yuuki was dying to ask, but he choked down the words. If he let him stay until



morning, his resolve would definitely disappear.

Yuuki stood rooted to the spot as Kamishiro brushed by him. He heard his foot dragging through the gravel outside the door, maybe for the last time.

"Kamishiro-san—"

Yuuki looked out the window, but the world was engulfed in black. Not even Kamishiro's shadow was silhouetted against the glow of street lights.

When they first met, Kamishiro told Yuuki that he was prepared to camp out under the stars. But that was in the summer. Now Kamishiro would freeze to death if he tried something so foolish.

Yuuki placed one uncertain foot ahead of the other and finally made it to the door. Kamishiro might still be in shouting distance, but Yuuki couldn't force himself to pull the door handle.

He took several shallow breaths, but his heartbeat showed no signs of slowing down. Exasperated, he clucked reproachfully to himself. Nobody was looking on, and yet he scolded himself to show a little class in the face of defeat.

Yuuki tore his eyes away from the gloomy outside world. He didn't want to look at the place where Kamishiro had disappeared. He locked the door and retreated into the house, making sure not to look at the still-messy kitchen.

Traces of Kamishiro remained in the living room, in his bedroom, in the bathroom. Every time Kamishiro's image rose to mind, Yuuki shook his head to drive the phantoms away.

"Maybe I should shut this place down and go back home," Yuuki muttered.

He had never considered the option, not even after Tsukada died. Yuuki closed his eyes. He recognized the face that appeared in his mind's eye, but he dared not call his name.

"I thought you knew. It somehow slipped my mind. I really am sorry," Yuuki said, bowing his head to Takai. He had just told him why Kamishiro had left.

"You seem to have a lot of time on your hands," Takai laughed, but his face clouded over at once. It was painful to see.

A week after Yuuki had closed the café with no note of explanation, Takai had heard that Kamishiro-kun had the flu. He stopped by early one morning to express his concern.

When Yuuki told him that Kamishiro had quit, the smile froze on Takai's face.

"But why—?" he started to say. He seemed so baffled, Yuuki almost had to laugh.

One week wasn't nearly enough time to heal, but somehow Yuuki had managed things. He was trying to buck up and run the café like he always had, before Kamishiro came into the picture. But his gloomy face told the real tale.

As if to scold himself for forgetting to smile, Yuuki slapped himself with the palm of his hand.

"W-what's that for?" Takai asked with surprise.

"Sorry. Just waking myself up."

Just like he thought, he had forgotten how to smile. The artificial cheer on his own face was reflected in Takai's stiff, painted-on expression.

"His name came to me a long time after the fact. I can't remember any of the other members of the expedition, but the severity of his wounds—"

"I should have recognized his name as well," Yuuki said quietly.

Kamishiro's name had been on Tsukada's itinerary. Before the ascent, he'd given a copy to Takai and Yuuki. Takai still had his copy. Yuuki had burned his. He didn't want to touch anything connected to Tsukada's death.

"When I think about it now, I can't remember him giving you a copy of any other itinerary. He must have had some kind of premonition," Takai said.

"That's not it. I suggested that we go together sometime, so he probably thought I had some interest in it."

A lot of mountain climbers just winged it from the start, but Tsukada always filed a detailed itinerary with the local police. Takai, an mountaineering outfitter in his own right, was also informed. Sometimes Tsukada even told his parents.

"He did it that way so you wouldn't worry, Sano-kun."

"Eh?"

"Lists of people to contact in case of emergency and stuff like that would just keep you up nights, right?"

"I guess so…"

The itinerary included the names and addresses

of the members of the expedition, plus the climbing schedule. Task assignments, equipment, and expenses were also included. If the situation arose, Takai was listed as the emergency contact. As Kamishiro's employer, this made sense, and now that Yuuki thought about it, he was glad his name hadn't been listed.

If the police or a mountain rescue team had ever contacted him, Yuuki's heart would have stopped on the spot. Yuuki pictured himself gripping the phone, sweat dripping down his face. He had lived through the days and months following Tsukada's accident in a panic. Remembering it now brought a cynical smile to his lips.

"That time when you were out shopping I asked Kamishiro about it. He only confirmed my suspicions and said nothing else. From that, I figured that he hadn't informed you."

"He's been the same with me," Yuuki admitted. "When I press him for more information, he only says it's true, and that's that."

He says. Yuuki couldn't even bring himself to use the past tense. Lingering regrets tugged at his heartstrings whenever he looked at the empty kitchen.

"By the way, I heard from your friend Suzutani," Takai said, changing the subject. "He was at a nearby job site and came in to buy a plastic tarp. I swear the subject only came up in idle conversation, but Kamishiro-kun really did suffer a compound break of his leg, though he claims it's healed pretty well."

"That's okay. Really. He's not around any more, after all."

Takai bowed several times, and Yuuki found himself feeling sorry for him.

"How about a refill?" he asked, holding up the coffee pot. With a soft smile, Yuuki took his empty cup.

"Your coffee sure is good, Sano-kun."

"It's the only thing I can do well."

"Oh, I don't know about that. But Kamishiro's java is pretty bad, and that day was no improvement. When Kamishiro offered me a cup, I didn't know what to say. Luckily, you returned just then."

"Really?"

So Takai had hated Kamishiro's coffee? Yuuki couldn't help smiling at the absurdity of the whole situation.

"Sano-kun?"

"Oh, sorry. It's nothing."

It was funny, though. Kamishiro had studied the culinary arts for more than ten years, his palate and technique honed to a fine degree. And yet he couldn't make a decent cup of coffee. Well, Kamishiro didn't smoke, so he probably wasn't interested in coffee, either. Yuuki wondered if Kamishiro kept his distance from such temptations because they dulled his taste buds.

Yuuki hadn't smiled in a long time. When Kamishiro was still here, he smiled constantly, whether they were working together during the day or embracing each other at night.

Kamishiro often asked Yuuki about the foods he liked, but Yuuki had never questioned him in turn. They didn't go out drinking together, and Kamishiro had never volunteered any information about his family or his past.

Discovering the differences between Kamishiro and Tsukada was frightening to Yuuki. *This* is different. *That* is different. He noticed such things, and yet had felt so peaceful in Kamishiro's arms. It simply made no sense to him whatsoever.

His assumptions had blinded him to the real Tsukada.

I didn't see what I wasn't looking for, he muttered to himself, a grin twitching his lips. Tears welled up in his eyes, but he put them down to laughter. Takai did his best not to notice.

"Well, I'd better be on my way," he said, standing up.

"Sorry I didn't get around to making you something to eat," Yuuki apologized.

"That's okay. When Kamishiro-kun gets back, I'll show up expecting a banquet. Sayaka is dying for more of that chicken fried rice with the egg on top. When I try to make it, the egg always ends up hard-boiled."

Yuuki waved good-bye as Takai left the café. He had told him the truth about why Kamishiro had left. But how did Takai view the whole affair?

Yuuki lifted his ponytail off his neck and sighed deeply. Takai's money, which Yuuki had intended to refuse, was sitting there on the counter.

Sorry, Sayaka-chan. The guy who makes the chicken fried rice isn't here anymore.

Yuuki's hair had grown out a little since Kamishiro had left. But it could grow down to his knees and he'd still be alone. He'd always be alone. Yuuki knew he should cut it, what with all the split ends, but he never managed to follow through. He wasn't sure himself about why he needed to drag this mane along with him. Was he just sentimental?

"I'll cut it tomorrow," Yuuki vowed to himself.

He said the same thing yesterday, and would probably say the same thing tomorrow. He grabbed a lock of his hair and sniffed it. It smelled like Kamishiro's hair, but of course it would. They both used the same shampoo.

Chapter 8

Yuuki spent most of the day sitting on the stool at the far end of the counter, aimlessly looking at the local paper. Feeling completely listless, he didn't even bother to fire up the kitchen stove. The café felt dark and cold. Even with the heater on, he had to wear a jacket.

He looked out the window and sighed. Just one more thing to live with. It had started snowing in the third week of October, and there was already almost a foot on the ground. When Yuuki thought of the long winter to come, the café felt even colder.

Last year around this time, Yuuki had been alone, too. Shin dropped by on a regular basis, but only to grab a meal and crash for the night.

Even if Shin were to drop by now, though that was highly unlikely, Yuuki could hardly treat him to a banquet. He did a quick mental inventory of the refrigerator and sighed. There wasn't enough there to feed a regular household, let alone stock a café. When Kamishiro left, Fuuka's menu went with him.

After having Kamishiro's cooking, Yuuki didn't feel inclined to take over the kitchen in his place. When he explained this to customers, they invariably agreed with him.

The fact was, in his heart of hearts, Yuuki didn't feel inclined to do much of anything. He wanted to say that Kamishiro had been a healing presence for him, but during all the times they had slept together, Yuuki was only trying to forget about the past. Dimly aware of how he was using Kamishiro, he had let himself be pampered and indulged for months.

How could Yuuki have known then that he would wind up hating him? All that remained of their relationship was the unappetizing taste of remorse, a deep thorn eternally stuck in his side. This was not simply a problem of the heart. His business had fallen off precipitously. Opening the café every morning was becoming a gigantic pain.

He needed to make money, but his expenses just kept mounting. He was even getting behind on payments for the stove that he'd purchased with Kamishiro.

"A good thing I didn't buy the reach-in refrigerator."

The refrigerator in the middle of the kitchen was the same old household appliance that his grandmother had used. He was tired of the thing, and had aimed to replace it sooner or later. Now he was grateful he hadn't made the investment.

Maybe he should just sell everything. But finding a second-hand dealer in a place like this, where new business ventures were as rare as hen's teeth, would be awfully tough.

The best of times, the worst of times. Six of one, half-dozen of the other. That's what it came down to. Yuuki felt depressed whenever he thought of the time he had spent with Kamishiro.

He turned a page of the newspaper and saw an

article about another mountain accident. Every year, these articles were tucked into a few columns in the local paper. Usually they were about hikers who had fallen ill during their climb, or hikers who strayed from the trails and froze to death. Tsukada's case was a bit different. Dying in an avalanche was very uncommon, Takai said.

Yuuki scanned the article, recalling those three days of agony when he had desperately prayed that Tsukada would turn up alive. Back then, Yuuki didn't dare to turn on the television or open a newspaper. He only waited for news from Takai.

But he had no use for such memories. Hiring somebody who wanted a view of those mountains had been his first mistake. Yuuki glanced around the café until his eyes rested on the kitchen, but he was looking for something that just wasn't there.

"No customers again," he muttered. "Guess I'll just lock up."

The world outside was bright with fallen snow. The sun made the droplets of water on the window sparkle like diamonds. Yuuki just stood there, stretching and taking in the view. He hadn't seen his parents for a while. Maybe he should drop everything and pay them a visit. Just as he was working out the details in his head, a large shadow darkened the doorstep.

Yuuki flinched. Was it Kamishiro?

The bell above the door rang as the door opened. The large shadow turned out to be only a young woman wearing a padded winter jacket.

"W-welcome," Yuuki squeaked out in a high voice that surprised himself.

Why did these neighborhood girls make him so uptight? It didn't help that he had thought she was Kamishiro, but she also looked a bit strange, with a scarf wrapped around her neck and over her mouth.

He glanced down at her legs and smiled. Though the temperature was low enough to turn her nose red, her legs were completely bare. Yuuki started to make some witty comment, and then thought better of it. She might accuse him of sexual harassment, so he held his tongue.

"Long time, no see," he finally said. "What are you doing out of school at this time of day?"

"We had exams, so I got out early," she said.

He smiled kindly at her and turned up the thermostat. She nodded and sat at the counter.

"I'll take a strawberry sundae," she said.

"It's cold today. You should have a warm drink first," Yuuki urged. "It'll be my treat."

"That's okay. Michiko wants her sundae," she said, referring to herself in the third person.

Yuuki had completely forgotten that her name was Michiko. She was a good customer. A long-time resident of the neighborhood. Yet Yuuki didn't even know her name, though they certainly saw each other enough to be on a first-name basis.

"Michiko-chan, you're not wearing makeup today."

"Nope. My foundation always rubs off on this scarf."

She heaved a great sigh and slowly unwound her scarf. The face that appeared had a cherry red nose and flushed cheeks.

She hasn't changed a bit, Yuuki thought, remembering when she used to build igloos in the vacant lot next door.

"Hurry up with the sundae," Michiko whined. She looked very depressed today for some reason. Yuuki dispensed with his usual conversation-starter: "So, you've come by yourself today?" Since she wasn't wearing gloves, she rubbed her frozen hands against her frozen thighs, trying to warm up.

Yuuki put the teapot on the stove.

"I said I wanted a sundae," she said dully.

"I'm making myself something to drink first. How about a nice cup of cocoa?"

"Okay."

The strange sound of rubbing flesh continued. Yuuki found himself, to his great surprise, drawn to the source of the sound. She noticed him gazing at her legs.

"What?" she snapped.

"Nothing. You just seem pretty cold."

"I'm okay. See?" she said, flipping up her skirt. Yuuki quickly looked away, but an image of navy blue fabric flashed across his senses.

"When it's this cold outside, I wear a *haramaki* around my middle."

"Oh. Of course," Yuuki nodded.

What an eccentric girl, Yuuki thought with a smile. It didn't really matter what she wrapped around her middle. Her exposed legs would still freeze in weather this cold.

He made two large mugs of cocoa and placed one in front of her.

"Thanks," she said, pouting her pink lips.

Even though she claimed to be wearing no makeup, Michiko had applied a generous amount of "stay-put" lipstick. Yuuki didn't feel like teasing her about it, though.

She grasped the mug with both hands and took a sip. The scalding liquid made her grimace at first, but she just blew on it a little and guzzled it down. She kept on holding the warm cup, even after the cocoa was gone. So she really had been cold.

"Still want that sundae?"

"Nah. I'm good," she said brightly.

For a moment she seemed to be her normal self again, but abruptly sank back into silence. Yuuki suddenly remembered something and went to the cash register. He took four ten-yen coins from the register and set them beside her.

"You never got your change from that night. Neither did your friend."

Michiko went a little pale.

Oh, you shouldn't have, Yuuki expected her to say. But when she finally spoke, her voice was barely a whisper.

"Uh, Yuuki-chan?" she began, looking uncomfortable.

"Yeah?"

"Are you and Kamishiro-san, uh, going steady?"

The *san* at the end of Kamishiro's name sounded almost too formal, like she was forcing herself to say it. That night must have really lowered his worth in her

eyes. Yuuki felt like he needed to defend his reputation.

"Guess that's one way to put it," he said quietly.

"But he's not around anymore. Did he quit?"

"Yeah."

Of course. That was it. She had a crush on Kamishiro. No wonder she showed up here looking so strained. Bittersweet memories of being with Kamishiro flittered through Yuuki's mind.

"Sorry, Michiko-chan, but Kamishiro probably won't be back. So—"

Now it all made sense. Poor Michiko was suffering the pangs of unrequited love.

And so are you, Yuuki told himself, feeling confused again.

"No, it's not that," Michiko said, as if reading his mind.

If she hadn't interrupted, his confusion would have eventually vanished, along with the rest of his unfinished sentence. Now Yuuki's submerged emotions again rose to the surface.

"The person I've always been in love with is you!" Michiko said dramatically.

"What?" Yuuki gasped.

Had she felt this way when Kamishiro was here? Or was she switching to her backup, now that the chef was gone? Though Michiko looked sincere, Yuuki was having a hard time taking her seriously.

"I'm telling you, it's not that!" she insisted. She hopped off the stool and stamped her feet like a little girl. Yuuki could only stare at her.

"Yeah, sure, Kamishiro-san is cute," she admitted. "But I've always had a thing for you. Now everything feels weird between us. That's why I haven't stopped by."

So Michiko had completely bought into Shin's version of events. If he wanted to, Yuuki could pass the whole thing off as a joke.

"I'm sorry," he said, reaching for her mug. "More cocoa?"

She shook her head, then looked at him with sympathy.

"Don't worry, Yuuki-chan. I haven't told anybody. Not even my friends. So—"

So say you'll go out with me. Was that what she was trying to imply? Leaving her face unadorned hadn't turned her into a child, but she did seem a little desperate.

"So *now* do you understand? Do you?" she suddenly cried, tears streaming down her face.

Yuuki wanted to scream along with her. Right now, he would happily cast aside his stubborn pride and beg Kamishiro to come back.

"I'm sorry, Michiko-chan. It's my fault, too."

"Your fault?"

"I chased him away. Now I'm so lonely, I don't know what to do with myself. I don't seem to give a damn about anything."

And that's why I can't go out with you. Such a calculating reply made him sick to his stomach. So lonely he didn't know what to do with himself? How smarmy could he get? He was secretly longing for Kamishiro to return, though he probably never would.

"Yuuki-chan—"

He glanced away, unable to look at her tear-stained face. The phone rang. Debating whether to answer or not, Yuuki finally grabbed the receiver.

"Sano-kun!" Takai said loudly at the other end.

The sound of his tense voice reminded Yuuki of that nightmarish day when he heard the news about Tsukada. His legs began to tremble.

Takai wasn't brimming over with good news, but Yuuki detected echoes of enthusiasm, even joy.

"I heard that Kamishiro is climbing Asahidake by himself!"

"What?"

"My wife's been watching the store lately. According to her, a guy that matches Kamishiro's description came in to buy camping fuel. He was there just an hour ago, so you might still catch him!"

Yuuki glanced out the window. *Kamishiro was in the neighborhood? And he's going to climb the mountain now, in the middle of the morning?*

Tsukada had always set out before dawn, not in the odd hours between breakfast and lunch. He would shake Yuuki awake and say, "I just want to see your face before I leave." Then he would shower grumpy Yuuki with kisses and take off.

It was just common sense to start a climb early in the morning. What did Kamishiro intend to do at this relatively late hour? Even Takai had his doubts about Kamishiro's apparent plans. Setting off for the Daisetsu range at this time of day was just plain stupid.

Yuuki had no time to waste, and flew out of the café.

"Yuuki-chan!" Michiko cried, but he didn't look back.

He couldn't lock up the café with customers still sitting there, but he didn't have time to worry about that now. He jumped into his car and turned the key with a shaking hand. Then he jammed the accelerator to the floor, and zoomed away.

"Takai-san!"

"Ah, you're here."

Takai had been anxiously waiting for Yuuki to arrive. He stood next to an SUV with his store logo stenciled on the side. The snow at his feet was packed down from all his pacing around in hiking boots. He looked like a runner just before a race.

"We'll take my car," Takai said briskly. "Yours would get stuck before we even reach the mountain."

Yuuki parked his car in the store lot and climbed into the passenger seat.

"I can't believe this!" Yuuki said, sounding upset. "Your wife noticed that the guy had a bum leg. Why didn't she contact me?"

Takai's warm smile was quickly replaced by a fierce expression. Cursing his wife under his breath, he leaned on the horn as the car ahead slowed down to a crawl.

"T-Takai-san. Be careful," Yuuki warned, nervous about the icy road.

"If we don't make it in time, then what?" Takai asked.

He had also been scarred by Tsukada's death, and was gripping the steering wheel with white knuckles. Yuuki knew Takai blamed himself for letting Tsukada climb the mountain that day. And now his memories of that lost life were shrouded in regret.

"Takai-san?" Yuuki said softly.

"Hmm?"

"Kamishiro-san is a lot like Tsukada-san, isn't he?"

Even if there was no one to blame, Yuuki cursed the good weather that had inspired Tsukada to climb the mountain. Why didn't he stop him? And why didn't he go with him?

Yuuki never had the chance to see Tsukada's frozen body buried in the snow. He never had the chance to say the things he needed to say. Yuuki desperately wanted Tsukada to come back and heal his wounds. He still wanted to find salvation in Tsukada's arms. He had looked for Tsukada's shadow in Kamishiro's soul, and then clung to those foolish desires.

Takai was also chasing Tsukada's ghost as he kept on driving. They had to stop Kamishiro from climbing the mountain. But would they be too late?

"You're right, Sano-kun. Kamishiro-san is a lot like Tsukada," Takai agreed.

"The way he smiles. The way he talks," Yuuki pointed out.

And the way he holds me, Yuuki thought. He was in no mood for history to repeat itself. They had to make it in time to stop him. Yuuki clenched his fists on his knees and said a silent prayer.

Suddenly they hit a traffic light, and Takai stomped on the brakes. He turned to look at Yuuki and took a deep breath.

"But, Sano-kun. Have you forgotten what Tsukada looks like?" he said gently.

"Of course not, Takai-san."

"Maybe their height and coloring are similar, but that's all," Takai declared.

"What do you mean?" Yuuki wanted to know.

Takai rested his head against the steering wheel, looking perplexed.

"Did you fall in love with him because he looks like Tsukada-san?" he asked gently.

"F-fall in love?" Yuuki gasped, blood rushing to his cheeks.

So Takai *had* noticed. Had Yuuki really been that obvious?

"But, uh, I mean, don't you think they look alike?" Yuuki stammered.

"Not really. Why don't you point out their similarities," Takai suggested with a smile. The tension in his voice was finally beginning to fade.

Suddenly the guy behind him beeped his horn.

"Okay, okay," he grumbled, stepping on the gas. Now Takai started to drive more cautiously.

What happened to all that adrenaline? Yuuki wondered. They would never get there at this rate. Takai handed Yuuki his cell phone.

"The visitor's center is on speed-dial. My head's been spinning so fast, I completely forgot."

"Will he even stop there?" Yuuki asked.

"He's supposed to sign a statement before he climbs the mountain. Tell them to make him wait if he stops by."

"Got it," Yuuki said, fumbling with the unfamiliar phone. For some stupid reason, he kept ending back in the address book. The first name under "T" was Tsukada.

His full name wasn't listed, only "Tsukada-kun," how Takai had always addressed him. Yuuki wondered if Tsukada had ever seen his name on this list. Probably not.

"Just my first name or my last name, okay?" Tsukada always said, usually with a pissed-off expression on his face.

"So you really don't think they look alike?" Yuuki asked.

"Nope," Takai said, shaking his head.

Yuuki closed his eyes and chased the two men through his thoughts. Both of them had sun baked skin. Pink, healthy cheeks. Snow-white teeth that made them look years younger.

In fact, Tsukada's baby face often made him look as young as Yuuki, which he teased him mercilessly about. Even Tsukada admitted there was a stark contrast between his muscular body and everything from the neck up.

He really didn't resemble Kamishiro at all. Or did he? After all, the corners of their eyes both crinkled when they smiled.

"Sano-kun, what are you doing? Hurry and make that call!" Takai urged.

But Yuuki kept his eyes closed, dreaming of Kamishiro. His untamed hair that framed his strong features. If anything, a stranger might mistake him for a man in his late thirties. Kamishiro's long, delicate fingers and neatly-trimmed nails were nothing like Tsukada's stubby ones.

What in the world am I doing? Yuuki suddenly thought.

Now he understood. He didn't fall in love with Kamishiro because he looked like Tsukada. He fell in love with Kamishiro…because he looked like Kamishiro. Or was that just another one of his convenient excuses? Did Kamishiro embrace him with his own guilty conscience?

A thought suddenly lit up Yuuki's head like a flash of lightning. If he was Kamishiro right now, where would he go? Yuuki thought he knew the answer, though he couldn't be sure.

"Takai-san!" he shouted.

"Yeah?" Takai muttered, preoccupied with the icy road.

"Risshou Temple!"

"Risshou Temple? You mean where Tsukada—"

"Yep. That's where he's headed," Yuuki declared, staring straight ahead. Not many people visited gravesites this time of year, when the temple grounds were covered with snow. It was just too hard to get through.

But that wouldn't stop Kamishiro. He wouldn't climb the mountain until he had paid his respects to Tsukada.

"Okay. Got it," Takai said. He instantly made a sharp U-turn, and was greeted by a chorus of honking horns. Takai rolled down his window and politely bowed his head to the angry drivers, and then took off.

"That idiot!" he yelled, talking about Kamishiro.

But Yuuki wondered in his heart which one of them was truly the idiot. Glancing down at the cell phone, he saw that the screen had already gone dark. Tsukada's name disappeared from view.

Chapter 9

They ended up going in the opposite direction from the base of the Daisetsu Range. The new cemetery occupied a broad swath of land on the outskirts of the city. One day soon after it was finished, Yuuki and Tsukada had passed by it.

"Looks like a typical bedroom community," Tsukada had snorted.

He certainly never dreamed that he would be resting there one day.

It was summer back then, and the plots were arranged like a miniature city. Now the miniature city looked abandoned.

The roads that bisected the blocks of cemetery plots had been plowed, but the gravestones were still blanketed with snow. It didn't really matter, since most people never visited here in winter.

Takai drove back and forth along the same road, unable to pick out landmarks. His driving grew more erratic, but Yuuki didn't worry as the car careened back and forth. He kept his eyes peeled for signs of Kamishiro, barely noticing when the car skidded sideways or when Takai jumped the curb.

"Damn it! He's got to be around here somewhere."

Suddenly the tires got stuck and spun around, making a whining noise. Takai slammed into reverse and finally managed to get them going again. He was sighing with relief when Yuuki pointed at something on the opposite side.

"Takai-san!"

Takai swung around to look. A man in a bright blue jacket was walking between the gravestones. Yuuki jumped out of the moving car, not even waiting for Takai to stop.

"Sano-kun!" Takai gasped.

Yuuki slipped and tumbled to the ground, but the snow cushioned his fall. He brushed off his arms and legs and hurried toward Kamishiro.

"Kamishiro-san! Kamishiro-san!" Yuuki shouted, following the trail of footsteps leading to Tsukada's grave. The snow proved to be softer than Yuuki expected, and his legs sank up to his calves. His shoes immediately felt cold and wet, but he really didn't care.

"Kamishiro-san!"

Based on what he was wearing, the man could have been just another out-of-town tourist, but he wasn't carrying skis or a snowboard. A large backpack sat at his feet, a pair of crampons dangling from the frame.

Was the idiot planning to spend the night on *that* mountain, on *that* leg, in the middle of winter? The relaxed look on Kamishiro's face pissed Yuuki off for some reason.

"You bloody fool!" he shrieked. He scooped up a handful of snow, smashed it into a ball, and flung it at Kamishiro.

"Hey!" the chef shouted.

"You stupid ass!" Yuuki yelled back.

He trudged toward Kamishiro, pelting him with snowballs along the way. Kamishiro didn't even try to duck. The snowballs bounced off his waterproof jacket, broke apart, and fell to the ground.

"What the hell were you thinking?" Yuuki hissed at him.

His footprints would vanish with the next snowfall, but what about the harsh words he kept flinging at Kamishiro? Yuuki suddenly stopped and hung his head, staring at the ground. The angry tone of his voice was staining the snow black, but he didn't seem able to stop.

"Idiot," he muttered, as cold seeped into his body. He even couldn't move his frozen fingertips. Every ragged breath released a plume of white smoke, quickly whisked away by the wind.

"Kamishiro-san!"

As Yuuki called out his name, he wondered if it was even his place to tell Kamishiro not to go. Did he have the right to beg him to come home?

"Y-Yuuki-san," Kamishiro finally said in a shaky voice.

Yuuki trembled when he heard his name. As the white hot anger left his body, the winter cold set in, giving him goosebumps all over.

"So you figured I'd be here," Kamishiro said casually, like he was talking about the weather. "The shrine office told me where to find Tsukada's grave. But all this snow sure got in the way."

The figure gazing at the cloudy sky didn't look like he was about to tragically brave the unknown. Yuuki quickly realized that he and Takai had been worrying over nothing. Suddenly he saw an envelope placed like an offering in front of the gravestone.

"But that's—" he started to say.

"Yes," Kamishiro nodded.

Yuuki's frozen ankles made strange popping sounds as he ran to Kamishiro's side. Kamishiro tried to hold him back, but Yuuki shook him off and picked up the letter.

What did Kamishiro write to a dead man? Yuuki wondered, as he pulled a sheet of paper out of the envelope.

"Kamishiro-san, what is this?"

"Read it and you'll understand."

Yuuki read it and quickly understood. It wasn't a letter to a dead man. It was Kamishiro's official mountain climbing itinerary. He had listed Yuuki's café as his current address and emergency phone number.

"You really are a fool," Yuuki hissed.

"Why?" Kamishiro asked calmly.

"Why did you leave this here, where the snow would cover it? They wouldn't find it until spring! What if you had an accident?"

"I wasn't planning to die up there," Kamishiro said seriously. "But if something did happen, I wanted them to contact you first."

Yuuki was about to call him a fool again, but his anger got caught in his throat. He gripped the paper so tightly that his fingertips turned red.

"No way! There's simply no way!" he snapped,

tearing the paper in half.

He wanted to wad it up and bury it under the snow. Instead, he lunged at Kamishiro, clutching the torn pieces in his hand.

What had made him so angry? What had made him so sad? Though he kept telling himself that Kamishiro was only a substitute for Tsukada, if Yuuki lost Kamishiro he'd have nothing left. He didn't care if Kamishiro was climbing the mountain as an act of atonement. Yuuki simply didn't want him to go, and would do whatever it took to convince Kamishiro to abandon this quest. He would kick, scream, even cry like a little baby, until Kamishiro finally agreed to come home.

"Your hair is a little longer," Kamishiro said, brushing it with his hand.

Yuuki pretended that the warm feeling on the top of his head came from Kamishiro's lips. He looked down and wrapped himself in Kamishiro's arms.

"It was all my fault," Kamishiro said quietly, his voice full of pain. "If I hadn't gone on ahead, Tsukada-san would have never come looking for me. He told me that I was drifting off the trail, but I didn't hear him—"

"That's enough," Yuuki whispered.

"I really need to do this. It's my obligation to Tsukada."

Yuuki's body went rigid, but Kamishiro's honesty was finally warming the cold knot of stubbornness in his heart.

"I hated feeling like a substitute every time I held you in my arms," Kamishiro admitted. "Every time

I saw you looking for Tsukada inside me, I realized more and more that I was turning into Shin."

"Turning into Shin?" Yuuki gasped with surprise.

Kamishiro cupped Yuuki's face in both hands, and tilted up his head. Now they were looking into each other's eyes.

"I didn't have the right to ask you to forget about Tsukada," Kamishiro said. "Yet every time we slept together, I heard three words over and over in my head. Forget about him, forget about him."

"You're wrong, Kamishiro-san," Yuuki whispered. He stood on tiptoe and threw his arms around Kamishiro's neck. Their cold lips pressed together, and soon their tongues entwined in a feverish dance. Hot air flowed out of Yuuki's lungs and spilled into Kamishiro's mouth.

Kamishiro's cheeks felt icy cold. Just how long had he been out here? Suddenly Yuuki smiled.

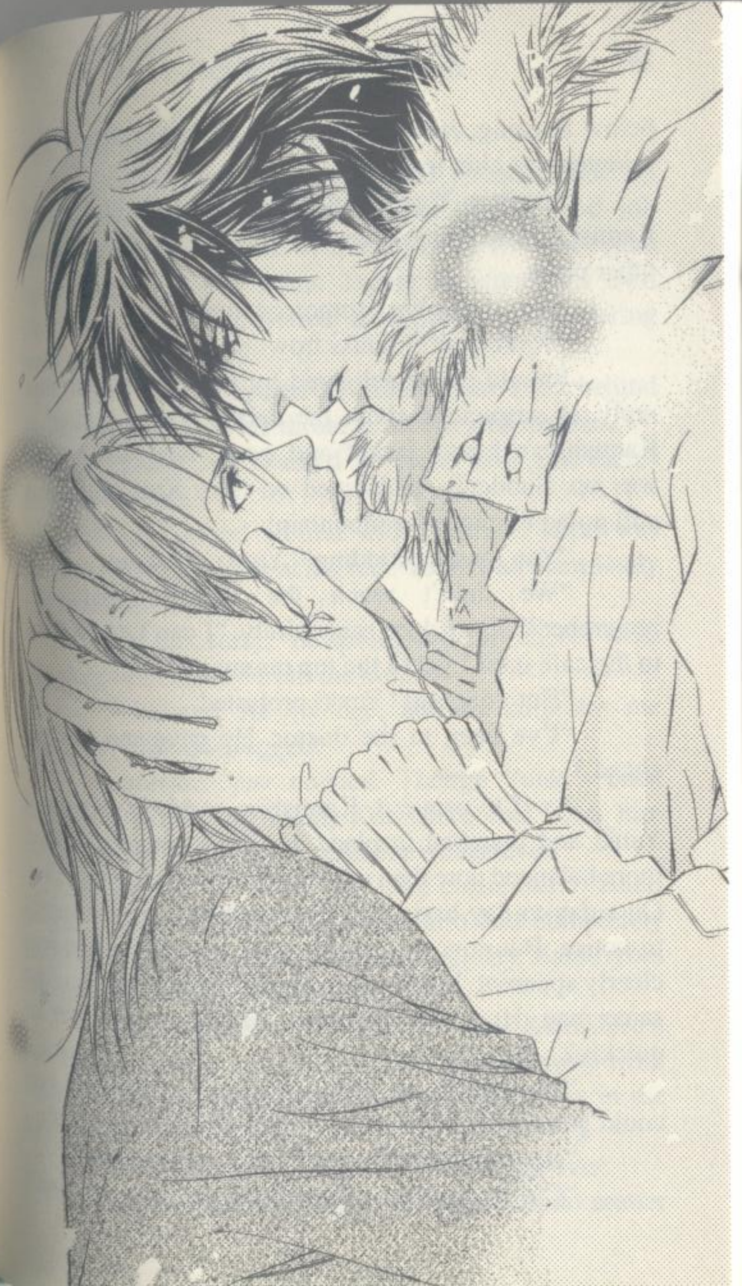
"Sano-kun," Kamishiro moaned.

"Call me Yuuki. Your voice sounds nothing like Tsukada's, by the way. No way will I ever confuse the two of you."

"Yuuki—"

Yuuki had a sudden, upsetting thought. If Yuuki finally got over Tsukada, would Kamishiro have no use for him? As tears welled up in his eyes, he gave Kamishiro a long, hard kiss. His breath grew ragged and his body began to burn.

Although the temperature usually rose above zero during the day, once the sun set, it plummeted well



below freezing. Just being outside for more than a few minutes was akin to suicide.

So when Yuuki said, "It's cold, let's go home," Kamishiro should have heartily agreed. Turns out he had other plans.

"No, I'll be back tomorrow night."

"Tomorrow?" Yuuki frowned.

Should he be delighted by Kamishiro's prompt reply, or suspicious about the delay? Yuuki looked at Kamishiro's heavy jacket and pack, wondering what was up. Suddenly, it dawned on him. Kamishiro was still going to climb the mountain!

"You must be kidding!" Yuuki cried out.

"We didn't reach the summit that day, remember?" Kamishiro said calmly. "I can't come back to the café until I get to the top on my own."

"But your leg!" Yuuki protested.

"I've been to the doctor. He gave me the go-ahead."

As if to prove it, Kamishiro suddenly let go of Yuuki and marched in place. His legs actually looked more balanced now than when they were living together. On a day-to-day basis, his progress had been too slight to notice. But now, one month later, the difference was clearly apparent. Yuuki could hardly believe this was the same man. How did Kamishiro manage to recover so quickly?

"Kamishiro-san, did the doctor actually say you could go mountain climbing?" Yuuki asked cautiously.

"He said that hiking would be no problem."

"Climbing Mt. Asahidake in winter isn't exactly hiking," Yuuki scoffed.

But he knew Kamishiro had already made up his mind. After all, Kamishiro had quit a good job to find Yuuki and work in his café. He wouldn't give up his quest at this point. Trying to ignore his own shortcomings, Yuuki stared at Kamishiro, wondering how to deal with him.

Just then, they heard a crunch in the snow behind them. Takai cleared his throat in an obvious manner.

"Ahem! Just wanted to make sure you didn't forget about me."

Yuuki turned around with surprise. Takai was standing there, looking at his feet. Yuuki had completely forgotten about him.

"Ah, um, sorry," he apologized. His cheeks were flushing, not entirely from the cold.

"Whatever. At my age, nothing surprises me anymore," Takai shrugged.

Kamishiro just nodded. Though Yuuki's back had been turned to Takai, Kamishiro had seen him coming and felt no embarrassment whatsoever.

Doesn't he ever feel self-conscious? Yuuki thought, remembering how Kamishiro had completely undressed in front of him that very first day. Aside from cooking, the man could be a bit dense.

Even more than his stubbornness, Kamishiro's indifference really got to Yuuki. He jumped away from Kamishiro, not before giving him a sharp elbow in the gut.

"Ooof!" Kamishiro groaned, doubling over.

"So you plan to climb that mountain no matter what, huh?" Takai asked.

"Yes," Kamishiro said resolutely.

"You've got the stop him, Takai-san!" Yuuki begged.

"I can't talk sense into someone craving to climb that thing," Takai sighed. He was himself a genuine, mountain climbing fool. Tsukada once said that Takai had opened the store to feed his addiction.

Yuuki stood there with a pounding heart, hoping that Takai would reconsider. But Takai just stood there with his arms crossed, staring vacantly into space. Suddenly he glanced down at Kamishiro's bum leg, and then visually checked out the equipment strapped to his pack.

"Takai," Yuuki said anxiously, unsure of what to say next.

"Just a minute," Takai said, taking out his cell phone. He quickly made a call and got someone on the line.

"Hello, Hirasaka-san? You available tomorrow? Great. Consider yourself booked. I have a guy going to Asahidake and back. Call the weather bureau and get a report."

Then Takai hung up, looking quite pleased with himself. He wasn't going to try and stop Kamishiro, Yuuki knew, but at least he could give him some company on the way up.

"Since we're slapping this thing together, let's go back and get ready," Takai suggested, starting to walk toward his SUV.

"Go back where?" Kamishiro asked, looking puzzled.

"This tour package includes a trail guide," Takai said, looking businesslike. "You can stay at my house. We'll take care of the remaining stuff tonight."

"But everything I need is right here," Kamishiro protested, pointing to his pack.

"You may be prepared to scale that mountain, but we aren't."

"We?"

Yuuki and Kamishiro exchanged glances. Just what did Takai have in mind?

"Hirasaka-kun and I will be your support team. We can do the whole thing in a day if we take the tram to Sugatami first, and then return while it's still running. Heck, we'll probably be home in time for dinner."

But despite this clever workaround, the trip would still be exhausting, Takai explained. They definitely needed some high-calorie food in their packs.

As Yuuki and Kamishiro gaped at him, Takai stretched out his hand.

"If we can put it together quickly, we can spend tonight at the Asahidake Hot Springs. They say soaking in them is good for the bones."

Takai obviously regarded this trek as just a carefree stroll on a winter's day. He seemed so totally relaxed, Yuuki quickly convinced himself that he should tag along.

"Takai-san! Count me in!"

"What?"

"Let's all climb the mountain together!" Yuuki beamed.

Though Tsukada had invited him on so many occasions, Yuuki had never actually been climbing. He had only waited for Tsukada, never doubting that he would return. But Yuuki wasn't going just for the fun of it.

Ever since that fateful day, that mountain had occupied his thoughts. So close, and yet so far away. Even though he had often read about climbing accidents, they had never seemed real to Yuuki until Tsukada's death. Now he couldn't stand to wait even a single day for Kamishiro to return.

"The tram goes halfway up the mountain, right? I should be able to do this. Take me with you," he begged Takai.

"Sano-kun. You can't take a mountain for granted, especially in winter."

Takai smiled faintly, but there was no laughter in his eyes. He sounded like a man with deep knowledge of the mountains, which he was, of course.

"The weather can turn bad in an instant," he went on. "In any case, this deep snow pack will make the going treacherous. Climbing a mountain is risky, and you're not exactly a he-man, Sano-kun. Kamishiro is an experienced climber, but he'll still need lots of help. Add an amateur like you to the mix, and things could get really dicey."

Though Takai's tone was gentle, he clearly didn't want to carry any more burdens up that hill. Yuuki had nothing to say. Takai was right, after all. If he tagged along, he'd only be a ball and chain.

"Well, let's go," Takai said.

Kamishiro hoisted his heavy pack. Just the

equipment needed to scale a mountain in winter would be much more than Yuuki could even carry.

He stared at each step that Kamishiro took, trying to convince himself that everything would be okay. But couldn't help noticing that Kamishiro still listed slightly to the right.

"Don't worry so much," Takai said, kindly patting him on the back. "You can see for yourself that his leg is doing fine."

Yuuki felt a little calmer, but not much.

"I appreciate all that you're doing for him," he said in a faint tone, feeling a little embarrassed.

Takai nodded and touched Yuuki's hand.

"Let me see that," he said.

Yuuki realized that he was still holding Kamishiro's torn itinerary. He handed the two pieces to Takai.

"Yes, indeed," Takai said as he scanned the information.

"Is something strange about it?" Yuuki asked, feeling a little nervous. His name, after all, was listed as Kamishiro's emergency contact. What would Takai say about that? Evidently he didn't even notice.

"No, not really," Takai said. "It's just a normal itinerary."

But suddenly he frowned.

"Takai-san?" Yuuki asked with concern.

"It's just that I share some of the blame here as well. Sometimes I just lose track of things, and they fall behind schedule."

Yuuki finally realized that he was referring to Tsukada's accident. The expedition set out in the early morning, and met with disaster while it was still daylight. But Takai didn't call Yuuki until it was already dark outside.

But Takai now seemed to understand how Yuuki had felt. Though he didn't hear about Tsukada's death until evening, Yuuki still blamed himself for spending the day in blissful ignorance.

"Deciding who should be contacted first is a tough call to make," Takai went on.

Especially if your lover is a man, Yuuki thought.

Takai folded his arms and looked thoughtful.

"What does your wife think?" asked Yuuki.

"Huh?"

"Doesn't all this waiting worry her?"

"Not really," Takai admitted. "She's rather indifferent to it all."

"That can't be true," Yuuki said in a small voice.

"Maybe not," Takai agreed. "Back in the day, they called me the god of the Daisetsu Range. That's why I decided to sign on this time around."

"Sorry to tell you this, Takai-san," Yuuki said with a grin. "But Tsukada used to call you the monkey of the Daisetsu Range."

"Oh, really?" Takai huffed.

Grateful for their frank talk, Yuuki took off after Kamishiro, who was briskly moving toward the car. Despite his heavy pack, he barreled through the snowdrifts like a sled dog.

"For crying out loud! Will you two get a move on?" he shouted to the others.

"He'd better not mouth off like that when we're on the mountain," Takai grumbled.

Yuuki just laughed.

Chapter 10

"Order for table two."

"Got it."

As Kamishiro passed the steaming plate to Yuuki, their fingers touched for a moment. Yuuki's heart instantly skipped a beat.

Just calm down, he told himself. *We have work to do.*

Though two months had passed since Kamishiro's return, Yuuki still got excited every time he looked at him. He was barely able to control his blushing as they ran the café together.

True to his word, Kamishiro had climbed the mountain and then returned to the café. On the day of his ascent, Yuuki had gone to Takai's store to see the three of them off, then spent the rest of the day worrying. As the sun started to set, Yuuki suddenly heard someone at the door.

"Yuuki? I'm back," Kamishiro said, his cheeks reddened by the cold air. Yuuki would never forget that moment. It was now fixed forever in his memory.

Yuuki wanted to wrap his arms around him, cover him with kisses, seek out the warmth of his flesh. But though Kamishiro had reached closure with a painful part of his life, he simply wasn't ready to resume their deeper relationship.

The New Year had come and gone. Though the climb had been only two months ago, it seemed like years to Yuuki. Soon their old customers started coming back in droves, and their days grew very busy.

Now and then, like an airplane hitting an air pocket, business would drop off for a while. Yuuki would crank up the background music, trying to fill the silence. Or he'd go shopping, even if he had nothing to buy. His desperate efforts to cope must have amused Kamishiro.

But despite everything, Yuuki was still happy they were living together again. He was no longer a prisoner of past. In fact, his days had never been as peaceful and happy as they were now.

Except for one thing. He just couldn't seem to control his lust for Kamishiro. It didn't take much to get him going. Their eyes would meet at some odd moment, or their hands would brush together. Almost instantly, Yuuki's heart would throb with all the anguish of a first love.

"Yuuki, table one needs their tab."

"Right."

Yuuki was about to pour himself a cup of tea, but he hurried over to the register. Another satisfied customer was waiting to pay his bill. Yuuki grinned from ear to ear, sharing in Kamishiro's accomplishment as if it was his own.

"Thanks for coming in!" he said enthusiastically.

This display of high spirits made the man smile. Every day, Kamishiro teased Yuuki about his good mood.

You could put me in an even better mood, Yuuki smirked to himself, but he didn't dare tell Kamishiro that.

He went back to fill his cup, but accidentally poured too much hot water into it. Looking at Kamishiro, Yuuki spilled the overflow into the sink.

"Better watch out. You'll burn yourself," Kamishiro teased.

Yuuki sighed. His burning desire for Kamishiro never went away, even though he "took care of himself" every night with his own hand. Why couldn't they just sleep together again? Was Kamishiro having a hard time, too?

This time around, their feet seemed to be planted in concrete. Breaking free would be tough, despite their previous physical relationship.

Since Kamishiro had returned from the mountain, Yuuki hadn't slept in his arms even once. Though Kamishiro had made his atonement to Tsukada, he still wasn't able to share his feelings about sleeping with Yuuki.

Despite Yuuki's impatience, he sensed that Kamishiro truly enjoyed his life out here in the sticks. Every night, after a long soak in the bath, he headed straight for his room. Every morning, he got up at dawn to play in the snow with the neighborhood dog.

On the surface, they were just roommates now. Their "good mornings" and "good nights" to each other certainly suggested nothing more.

But Yuuki still wished they could spend more time together after work. Maybe he could suggest that they have sex just for something else to do. To keep each other warm, etc., etc. He had spent the last two months fantasizing about what to say, how to break the ice, but never followed through. Just then the front door opened.

"Welcome," Kamishiro called out. "Would you like to sit at the counter?"

Yuuki turned around and saw his old friend Shin.

"So you finally cut your hair," Shin said.

"Yeah. I'm just going back to the way it was," Yuuki admitted, hanging his head.

They hadn't seen each other for ages. Shin kept staring at Yuuki's new hairstyle, making him feel self-conscious.

"I'm transferring to Honshu," he said suddenly. "The general contractor there took a shine to me, apparently."

There was still a lot of baggage between them, but Yuuki was glad that Shin had come in personally to tell him about the move. It couldn't have been easy for him.

"Uh, sorry about before," Shin said with a shy smile. Yuuki looked him up and down. Had Shin put on a few pounds?

· They continued their awkward conversation, going out of their way to be polite to each other. When Shin finally stood up to leave, Yuuki felt relieved.

"I'll be back for *O-Bon*. Let's have a drink together then," Shin said graciously, heading for the door. Suddenly he turned around to look at Yuuki.

"It's a good thing we didn't sleep together," he said quietly. "Long-distance relationships never work out.'"

They had known each other for ten years. Would things be different between them now if Kamishiro had never shown up? Once upon a time, Yuuki had anguished over the possibilities, but now he knew they would never be more than friends.

"I'll be making twice what I've earning now. Guess I'm lucky," Shin shrugged.

It's not just luck. You're a good guy, Yuuki wanted to say, but that would sound too much like a parent giving a child a pat on the back. His face suddenly felt hot and uncomfortable. When Yuuki didn't reply, Shin's face clouded over.

"Sorry. I shouldn't have come here," he sighed.

"Don't say that!" Yuuki protested. "I'm glad you did!"

Shin smiled and held out his hand. As Yuuki gently took it, their eyes met for a brief moment. The smiles they exchanged were genuine.

"See you around," Shin said, and then he left.

He always said good-bye like that. Yuuki could almost believe that he would be stopping by tomorrow and the day after. Despite all that had happened between them, maybe a day would come when they could finally hang out together without feeling strange. Or so Yuuki hoped. They had been friends for so long. It was a shame to let it all go.

Back in the kitchen, Kamishiro was probably stewing about Shin's visit, Yuuki thought. But instead, his unsociable cook was preparing for the next day.

"What was that all about?" Kamishiro asked casually.

"No big deal," Yuuki muttered. Talking about it wouldn't really change anything.

"Huh?"

"It's nothing important."

Yuuki wore a mask of indifference as he started cleaning the café. They managed to end the day without a cross word between them.

"Here's your order."

A sudden rush of customers near closing had kept the café open until ten o'clock. The week before, Yuuki had argued that they should take their last orders around eight, especially since they didn't serve alcohol.

"Why fence ourselves in with rules and restrictions?" Kamishiro protested. Since they failed to reach a consensus, Yuuki was getting used to working off the clock, though he didn't like it.

"After you finish, go ahead and take a load off," Kamishiro suggested.

"I know that. You don't have to tell me," Yuuki huffed.

Yuuki definitely didn't possess Kamishiro's boundless energy, and had often pointed this out during their "discussions." Their working conditions were different, too. Why wouldn't he be tired, running around like he did all day? Yuuki gave Kamishiro a hard look, but the chef just kept arranging pots and pans.

He still refused to take even a meager salary. Once word got around that Kamishiro was back again, their sales had more than doubled.

"I can't pay you what you're worth," Yuuki pleaded, "but at least let me pay you something."

"I'm not working here for the money," Kamishiro said stubbornly.

Yuuki offered to pay him enough to meet the minimum income tax requirements, but Kamishiro still shook his head.

"I'm not really looking for financial reward," he repeated.

As hot water rained down over his head, Yuuki stood in the shower and sighed. He stretched his arms over his head, trying to loosen his tense shoulders. He had spent so much time dragging the past behind him. Maybe it was time to cut his losses and move forward.

"Ahhhh," he said, as the hot water worked its magic.

He had really wanted to take a bath, but was too impatient to fill the tub.

His calves felt as tight as drums. Since he spent every day on his feet, the lower half of his body was a constant source of irritation. He raised one leg and massaged his strained muscles.

"Man, that's stiff," he muttered.

I wonder how Kamishiro's big fingers would feel? The thought popped into his head, striking a flame inside his body.

"Ahh…"

He turned the shower head to one side and stroked the back of his thighs, all the while fantasizing about Kamishiro's thick, strong arms.

Here…like this…touch me…slowly…

Yuuki moved his hand up between his buttocks and touched that throbbing part of him. His sphincter twitched and quivered. When would Kamishiro finally enter him again?

The water from the shower head pattered onto the tile, as his stifled gasps echoed off the walls.

"Hmmm," Yuuki moaned, grabbing his hard cock with his other hand.

Those nights of passionate sex seemed so long ago. Yuuki felt pangs of hunger in his heart, but there was no way he could share them with Kamishiro.

"Ah…ahhh…ahhhh…" he panted.

His hole still felt too tight to accept a single finger. Impatiently wiggling his ass, Yuuki massaged his testicles, hoping to hurry things along.

"Damn," he spat out, impatient to finish.

He was standing with his cheek pressed against the shower wall. A strange position, to be sure, but he didn't want to stop stroking himself long enough to move.

"More…more…" he moaned from between his clenched teeth.

Suddenly the bathroom door opened.

"Oh, sorry!" Kamishiro said, hearing the shower running.

"What?" Yuuki gasped.

Kamishiro peered around the door, then quickly turned away when he saw what Yuuki was doing.

"Sorry!" he said again, and then slammed the door.

Blood rushed to Yuuki's head. Kamishiro had seen him like this, and had run away.

"Wait!" Yuuki cried out, running naked down the hallway. Water dripped all over the floor, but he didn't care. He was almost in a state of shock, but he kept on moving.

"Kamishiro-san!" Yuuki said, finally catching up to him. The chef slowly turned around.

"What?" he asked serenely, but his eyes were wandering everywhere.

They both cleared their throats at the same time. Yuuki felt the blood running to his head as their eyes locked together.

Then suddenly, it happened. Without a second thought, Yuuki heaved his naked body against Kamishiro, who was still wearing his chef's smock.

"I didn't hear the shower running, so I…" Kamishiro started to say, but Yuuki's ears were deaf to such excuses,

"Oh, Yuuki…" Kamishiro sighed.

"Kamishiro-san."

Yuuki couldn't stand it any longer. He covered Kamishiro's wet mouth with his own, straining against the painful desire to come on the spot.

Yuuki pushed Kamishiro against the wall and jammed himself against his body. Saliva dribbled from the corner of Kamishiro's mouth and ran down his chin.

Yuuki greedily licked it off with his hot tongue.

Suddenly, without warning, Yuuki's penis spurted like a geyser, though Kamishiro hadn't even touched it.

I can't believe it, Yuuki thought, as his hips jerked and shuddered.

"You…" he moaned, clinging to Kamishiro, grasping his arms. Kamishiro grabbed Yuuki's hands and held them tight. A trail of semen stained his smock and continued down to his jeans, but Kamishiro wasn't complaining.

"Take me," Yuuki begged. "Take me."

He didn't care if Kamishiro was only doing him a favor. That would be more than enough for Yuuki. He wanted Kamishiro more than anything else in the world, but was still too scared to find out if the feeling was mutual.

The first time Kamishiro had thrusted inside him, Yuuki had pretended he was Tsukada. Back then, that was what he thought he wanted to feel. Looking at Kamishiro now, standing close enough to feel his breath, Yuuki was still unable to cry out his name. His body quivered with fear and confusion, craving the contact that would wash it all away.

As Yuuki nipped at Kamishiro's neck, he could feel his heartbeat. He fastened his lips to the skin like he was a vampire sucking blood.

"Son of a bitch!" Kamishiro gasped, scooping Yuuki up in his arms. Yuuki wrapped his legs around his waist, clinging to Kamishiro like a child.

"Son of a bitch!" Kamishiro gasped again.

His rough voice set Yuuki's loins on fire. He had just ejaculated minutes ago, but feeling Kamishiro's erection against his groin made Yuuki's cock stand at attention.

Kamishiro carried Yuuki down the hall to his bedroom and kicked the door open. Then he threw him on the futon like a piece of luggage. The sudden pain made Yuuki howl, but it quickly turned into a sweet throbbing as Kamishiro loomed over him.

"Kamishiro-san," Yuuki said, looking straight into his eyes. "Why have you been giving me the brush-off ever since you came back?"

Yuuki hadn't exactly thrown himself at Kamishiro, either. But he had at least indicated that he was interested.

"I've been wanting you all this time," Yuuki whispered, nibbling on Kamishiro's earlobe.

He felt Kamishiro's hot tongue on the nape of his neck.

"Yuuki…" Kamishiro moaned, as he played with Yuuki's hair. Suddenly he stopped and gave him a smoldering look.

"Am I the one you really want?" he asked bluntly.

"Yes. Yessssss," Yuuki gasped, his hips shuddering. He undid the buttons of Kamishiro's smock with trembling fingers.

"I was worried that you might regret it if we slept together again," Kamishiro explained.

Then why didn't you come right out and say so! Yuuki thought wildly.

But he only flashed a wry smile. Truth be told, they had both felt too intimidated to make the first move.

As they moaned each other's names over and over, their erections grew even harder. Yuuki unbuttoned Kamishiro's jeans and slipped them off, along with his briefs. He caressed Kamishiro's bare buttocks for a moment, and then grabbed his swollen cock.

"Hey!" Kamishiro yelled, but he wasn't objecting.

Yuuki massaged the sensitive tip of Kamishiro's member with the ball of his thumb. Kamishiro furrowed his brows and clenched his teeth, trying to hold back. Suddenly Yuuki kneeled on the futon and raised his ass.

"Hurry! Enter me!" he begged, his bottom undulating with desire. "I want you soooo bad, Kamishiro-san…"

Kamishiro grabbed Yuuki's thighs, lifted them up, and shoved his erection into him.

"Ahh!" Yuuki cried out, finally feeling that longed-for sensation. His hole pulsed greedily, trying to swallow Kamishiro up.

"Haaa…haaaa…haaaa…" Kamishiro panted, driving his his shaft into Yuuki's depths. Yuuki's hips shook in a kind of sweet agony.

Kamishiro's rod kept on exploring, burying itself deeper and deeper as Yuuki screamed and groaned.

"Kamishiro-san," he moaned. "Don't stop, don't stop…"

Just then Yuuki felt something erupt inside him.

"Sorry!" Kamishiro gasped with embarrassment,

but Yuuki just grinned. His anal muscles clamped around Kamishiro's drooping member, like they were sad to see him go. All of a sudden, the penis came back to life.

"You're like a kid who can't get enough," Kamishiro teased.

"That's fine by me. As many times as…"

But before Yuuki could finish the sentence, the steel rod inside him began thrusting again, setting his flesh on fire.

As Kamishiro penetrated him deeply, Yuuki felt his eyes fill with tears. Kamishiro had unveiled the depths of his heart, making his desire bubble over. He wanted to quiver with this pleasure all night.

"Ahhh…haaaa…haaaa…" Yuuki moaned, moving his hips gently from side-to-side.

He reached his arms back to Kamishiro as if to say: *Taste me. Devour me. Never let me go.* Suddenly Kamishiro tensed all over.

"Kamishiro-san!" Yuuki screamed, as Kamishiro filled him a second time. He was panting so hard, he felt about to faint. Kamishiro pulled out and turned Yuuki on his back.

"Yuuki," Kamishiro whispered, darting his tongue inside his mouth. Their hot tongues danced together for a while, until they finally came up for air. Though Yuuki's body glowed with pleasure, his lust was still not quenched.

"Let's do it again!" he yelled.

Again and again. To the morning light.

Kamishiro grabbed his cock with his large hand. Yuuki responded minutes later with a sopping wet emission.

See? This is how much I want you…

I came. I saw. I conquered. Kamishiro had uttered those words when he reached the summit of the mountain.

He came. He saw. He conquered. And now Yuuki wanted to experience that feeling for himself.

"Maybe we should take tomorrow off," Yuuki suggested lazily. Everything below his waist was still feeling deliciously numb.

"If you're really serious about climbing that mountain, you'd better shape up," Kamishiro advised.

"Huh?"

"Oh, nothing."

Yuuki merrily stole another kiss. It was going to be another late morning for both of them.

Afterword

A big hello to everyone! My name is Raica Sakuragi, and I'm deeply honored that you've read this novel.

This is my first *bunko* edition paperback for Prism Publishers, and actually the first bunko paperback I've ever written. A novella, to be more precise, a bit shorter than an "illustrated novel." I'm still amazed that I was able to pull it off.

This story takes place in the country, that wide world right outside the window. People are few and far between there. How does anyone get any work done in a place like that? On this stage splashed with local color, we have the story of a broken-down cook and a heartbroken café owner. Big bear meets long-haired *sasoi-uke*.

After seeing other illustrations by Katsumi Asanami, I fell in love on the spot. "I want her to draw my long-haired *uke*!" I thought. Those desires gave birth to luscious fruit, and I loved her initial sketches. This one? Or this one? Or this one? I practically swooned in agony, it was so hard to choose!

Asanami-sama, thank you from the bottom of my heart. Your delicious gift of the "Hey, grab me a towel!" sketch is greatly appreciated.

Speaking of delicious gifts, the subject of fine cuisine was only a small part of the story at first. I like to cook, but usually just make stuff that can be slapped together in a couple of minutes.

But halfway through my first draft, Kamishiro suddenly became a professional chef, and I couldn't really fake those types of recipes. After much agonizing, I finally appealed to a friend for help. My friend, who works as a chef, kindly created some recipes for me.

If you are interested in Fuuka's menu, please let me know, so I can send you recipes.

My friend also told me about the licenses needed to run a café. When he asked, "Does he have his chef's license?," I broke out in a cold sweat! But it turned out to be not that important.

The story begins at the end of summer and concludes the following winter. "Fuuka" can also be read "kazahana," a term for when the wind whips the snow into the air like flower petals. I'd be happy if this brings to mind the dancing white snow carried in by the wind from the frosty mountain peaks.

The long winter has already begun in Hokkaido. Though it looks very picturesque, it is a harsh time of the year for people living there.

Alas, I don't have a cook to whip up a warm meal to cure what ails me. My cats share their warmth as I contemplate the long winter nights to come. "Not again!" I sigh to myself. But don't worry that I'm about to drop dead under a snowdrift. Take this as proof that I'm alive and kicking!

My "Cat in my Lap" website:

http://sakuragi.skr.jp/neko/

Drop me a line and let me know how you're doing! Until we meet again—

December 2006
Raica Sakuragi

"There you go," he said gently.

Shin cracked open his eyes and crawled under the covers. Clutching the blankets around him, his breathing soon grew relaxed and even.

"Don't sleep with your stomach sticking out," Yuuki snorted. "G'night."

Shin was already fast asleep, but that didn't bother Yuuki. This dance would doubtlessly continue for some time to come.

Shin's passions simply weren't strong enough to overcome the taboos. And Yuuki wasn't brave enough to overcome the circumstances that had defined their lots in life. When fraternal love and erotic love were placed on the scales of life, it was clear which side would win.

But if their warm times together continued like this, so be it.

Yuuki picked up the hand cream and put it back in the hutch. Last year at this time, a collection of photographs adorned the shelves. But since Shin had started sleeping over, they reminded Yuuki too much of the photos that had been displayed at Tsukada's funeral.

As if to exorcise Tsukada's ghost, Yuuki had rid the house of every trace of him. Constant reminders were just way too painful.

He hated himself every time he felt Shin's eyes on him. Even though he tried to put it out of his mind, Yuuki knew that their relationship had slowly changed to something else. He felt guilty about so calmly discarding the past like a gust of wind blowing sand across a beach.

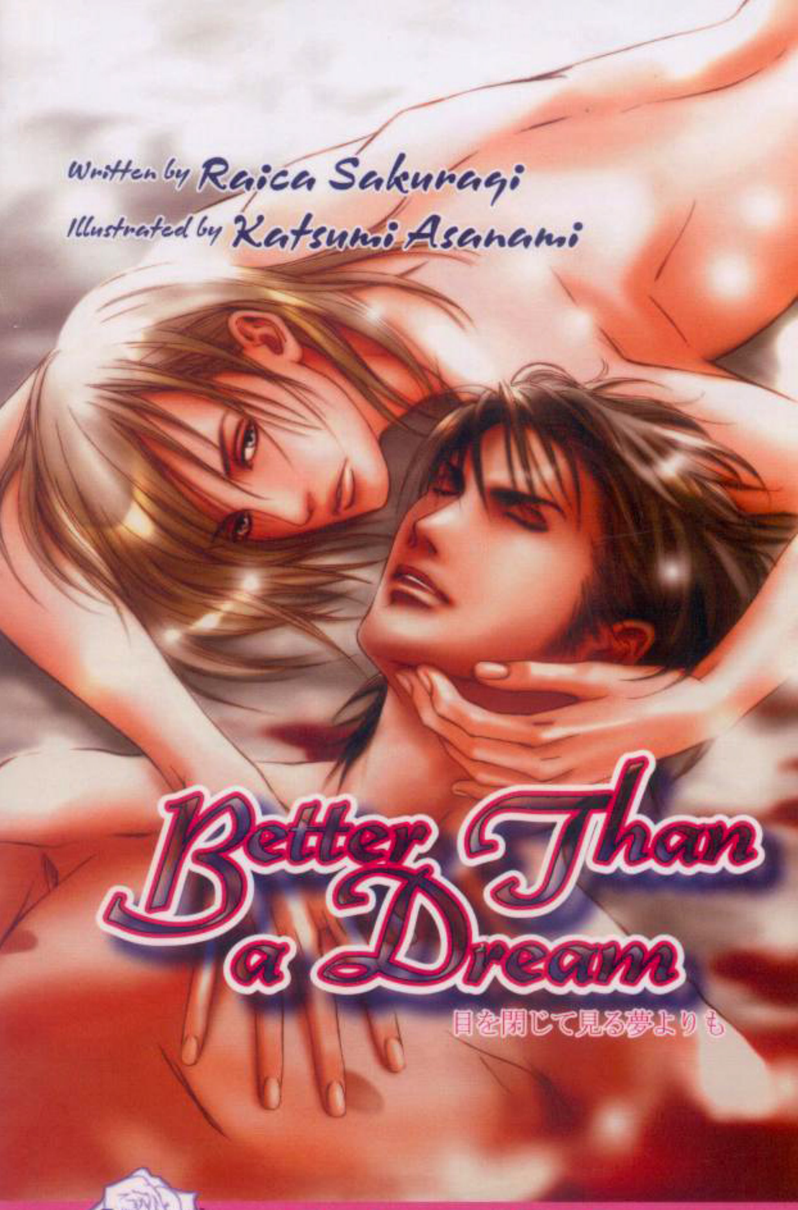
"Good night," he called out one more time, closing the door behind him.

He made his way to his bedroom. When he woke up the next morning, Shin would again demand breakfast, and Yuuki would again be astounded at his ravenous appetite. The gentle curve of their emotions, shaken slightly, always returned to their same indifferent positions.

Each day no different than the last. Every day simply more of the same.

Written by Raica Sakuragi

Illustrated by Katsumi Asanami



Better Than a Dream

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June

Yaoi Novel